

# ***RPG REVIEW***

***Issue #10, December 2010***



## **Cyberpunk and Near Future Special**

***Megareview of Cyberpunk RPGs (Cyberpunk,  
Shadowrun, Cyberspace, GURPS, Corporation, Traveller)  
... The Future Is Near ... Paranoia: The Melbaplex  
PBeM ... The World in 2090 ... Angus Abranson  
Interview ... Space 1889: The Working Man's Struggle ...  
Bad Company Review ... Enter The Void Review***

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## ADMINISTRIVIA

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# EDITORIAL

Yes, we are *extremely* late this issue. I won't harp on about it, except to say there was a range of personal issues, and illness which delayed publication by over a month.

Nevertheless, I hope it is worth it - a special near future/cyberpunk edition of RPG Review, complete, of course, with a number of appropriate reviews and an overview article on how the near future has been presented in various roleplaying games.

Karl Brown gives a brief overview of the world in 2090, partially inspired by the famous timeline in Cyberspace, but with much greater and more realistic scrutiny. Brendan Evans brings simultaneous fear and happiness with a somewhat derived Paranoia play-by-email. Erica Hoehn provides a multi-system NPC according to our theme. Our truly retrospective article comes from Simon Stainsby who has adopted a radical take on the Space 1889 setting which gives more meaning to the old trope of "Red Mars". Semi-anonymously MADali provides a console game review of Bad Company; slightly old but with some poignant comments, and our regular movie reviewer Andrew Moshos provides a glimpse into *two* something terribly strange films even for those who welcome such artistic endeavours. And I bet you all thought it would be a review of the new version of Tron.

Also as a regular Minghsi take the opportunity to give me hell, but so what else is new? I notice she's also told us that we're playing GURPS Bunnies & Burrows Cyberpunk for our regular easter session and has provided a sample character. Um, yeah? Regular artist Jensen has provided two lovely art pieces for this issue, one above of "Fight On Weasels" and on the concluding page, Forty Fat and Fangs. OK, so they're not really cyberpunk or near future or anything like that, but damn if he doesn't have talent. Finally, we are very pleased to have an interview with Angus Abranson of Cubicle 7 who gives some insights on how this little company is making big waves - and he even answers the mystical question "What Is A Cubicle 7".

The theme for this issue, as mentioned, is cyberpunk and the near future. The question that this editorial will try to address is what does the 'near future' hold for the tabletop gaming industry. This is a much vexed question because everyone and their dog, every year, tries to predict either a great revival of roleplaying games (normally with their new product) or the certain death, whether by computer games, LARPing, card games, MMORPGs or even a revival of tabletop board games.

Industry participants, owners of FLGS and so forth however should never complain nor be surprised by such things. We understand the concept of substitute goods. We are well aware of the direction that technology is taking the industry. Rather than moan or divest, these threats - to use the basic business language - are actually opportunities.

How so? Because a threat displays itself. Computer games make an appearance. You know what computer games can do, you know what MMORPGs can do as well. What *can't* they do well? (Answer: Narrativism) How can they complement tabletop roleplaying rather than substitute it? (Answer: Dispersed players). We know how online publishing has changed the industry, and how that is going to continue. We've already worked out very well (perhaps only second to the adult entertainment and music industry) how to adapt to this new form of sales and marketing. As for the FLGS? It's a challenge, but more to the point it's a change of perspective. Think back to the late 70s, when there was only a small supply of games - what did you do then? You built communities.

The FLGS can survive quite well with a minimal stock, but large range, an expert shopkeeper, but most of all, *a place*, where gamers can meet and play. Sure, such a space may require that you have your base in a more questionable part of town, but try to think back to when you started gaming. You found such places, right? You even enjoyed sneaking away on a Saturday afternoon, going down alleyways off the main drag, climbing rickety stairs and entering a world where expressions of the fantastic was accepted. OK, maybe I'm just reminiscing of the old Simulations and Kite City or even Valhalla Games, both old haunts in Perth, Western Australia. But the point being is that I am sure that every

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city has, or had, a place like this where a gaming community found its place.

Now, what about the games themselves? Well, this one isn't easy either. Back in yesteryear there was a fairly limited range to choose from. Now, it is virtually impossible to keep up-to-date with what's available. If you're a lucky sort of person that plays one RPG per week, according to John Kim's exceptional encyclopedia, you would have had sufficient time to play two to three sessions of every game that was released in that year. I think the list might be wrong; based on the 2009 releases you would have managed *one* session only.

So some game designers have headed in that direction. They have made tightly-focussed, rules-light games designed for a few sessions of interesting play and have specialised in putting in a couple of clever rule systems that add to the story. The *very* clever versions of the same have designed the games so they could forseably go on for dozens of sessions or can be easily adapted to different settings.

One the other scale of things is the more generic games of yesteryear that have an unbelievably tight group of focussed fans, and the relative popularity of the game from either the time then or now seems to be now barrier. The Fantasy Trip, Powers & Perils, DC Heroes, TORG - all are examples of game systems which still have active mailing lists and participants. Many - but not all obviously - play these games almost exclusively. How, you may fairly ask, is the producer of a generic game system supposed to make inroads in such a balkanised environment?

The answer is not pretty. You simply have to design *better* games, *better* editions, and *better* supplements. Designers have to start thinking with an obsession about design quality, artists have to become obsessed with producing the best art, manufacturers with the most sturdy books. The reality is that a roleplaying game is a product which can keep several people entertained for *decades*. Why would they shift to another game unless it provides them solutions to problems they have in the current game, or is more adaptable, better designed etc.? This is why new editions of a game *must* be better than their predecessor. Writing something which is even "as good" will not shift the grognards. and nor should it. See that image? That's about *a third* of my gaming collection. Do you really think I need more?



It is the obsession with quality is how both Japan and Germany dragged themselves from being totally destroyed to becoming economic superpowers. That's a little something I've learned in my MBA studies. It something that game designers have to seriously latch on to; there are so many options only the best will survive.

OK, that's it for this issue, I've had my editorial rant at the very least (more rants within). Next issue is themed around 'alternate worlds', the different settings and quirky logic in such design. We are also very fortunate to have none other than Johnathan Tweet, a long-standing friend of RPG Review, as an interview subject.

Enjoy! And don't forget to write a letter, submit and article or art-piece!

Lev Lafayette

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# HOT GOSSIP: INDUSTRY NEWS

*by Wu Mingshi*

Hosei bo Mr. Lev,

You know you always late one, lah? But now you like the planet, the moon has passed overhead and much rain fall from the sky, and you tell me this is Christmas issue, say you. Hey, you know Jewish friend tell me that Joseph go to Bethel for gahmen tax-time, and that in September. Maybe one day you so late that December issue will be in September the following year? But this column no about picking on Mr. Lev all the time. Mingshi especially like cyberpunk issue, very much like island home, complete with chao kah big corporations and bodoh gahmen.

So because you old and crusty and Mingshi young and pretty, I has special job of giving people new news. You know cyberpunk and near future? All your reviews are so old! I have to tell news! Darwin's World, now have Savage Worlds edition, and White Wolf have new cyberpunk game called Mirrors: Bleeding Edge. Also White Wolf release new product for Vampire: The Requiem that have plenty of bite, "Scenes of the Embrace", with fourteen short game-stories, and Zombocalypse has Savage Worlds edition. Maybe new game need, Savage Wolf?

Little Fears has new scenario called "The Longest Night of Your Life", now third in series with "The Fall Harvest" and "Beggars Night". Mingshi think that roleplaying game that live long has scenarios as well as as rules. Little Fears doing well then, lah? Same news for new edition of Earthdawn, with supplement called "Cathay: The Far East". No prize if you guess what this about! Also, Delta Green, one of Mingshi's favourite games, has odd-titled scenario "Denied to the Enemy". More excited, it has secret alien base and Nazi myth of Thule. But who think such boring title?



Multimedia big part of roleplaying scene, and this season (I still call seasons for you, but I only have two). Comic series Artesia has new game called Adventures in the Known World, very pretty colour book! In stun, the Udon Comics have comic series for roleplaying game Exalted. But Udon already do Exalted comic in 2005. Is this new comic, old comic in new cover, reprint? Mingshi need secret spies to tell her more!

Also multimedia the Pelgrane Press bring out special music for Trial of Cthulhu, called 'Eternal Lies Suite' and Deadlands now have two music collections; Aces and Eights soundtrack and Weird Wailin's soundtrack. Maybe Deadlands think about having special rock concert for wild west gamers? You could have Neil Young, John Cash and Norah Jones!

The Pelgrane Press, also do new Trail of Cthulhu supplement call "The Big Hoodoo", except this one set in 1950s. Mingshi think that 1950s scary enough, and wonder about Happy Days Cthulhu Crossover. Maybe Ralph Malph secretly become Deep One and investigators hired by Austin Powers to save

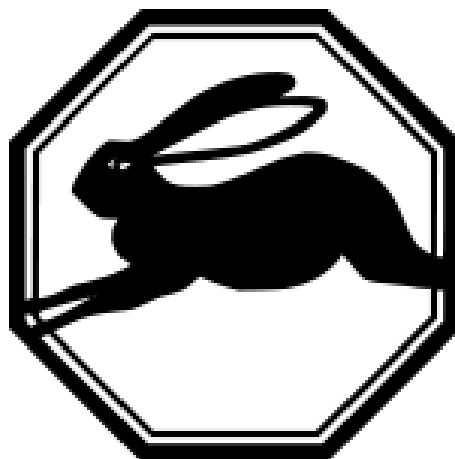
him? Mingshi wonder if there isn't a decade in twentieth century which Cthulhu not touch yet? Maybe Cthulhy 70s with afro-hair cut and bell bottoms?

Big company news is Iron Crown Enterprises, long ago story famous for Middle Earth Role Playing and Rolemaster are "under new management", with Aurigas Aldebaron LLC now directly managing website and forums and design now with Guild Companion people. They promise more strong management for release and product. So new ICE not new bird and maybe save face? Maybe I sayang for Rolemaster, all its cartoon charts.

Rumours are foot, that Torg, once upon time of West End Games, all bought up by Ulisses Spiele. You think with name like that they might be German? Yes! Currently they have very popular German RPG "Das Schwarze Auge" (something about eyepower?), and German translation of Paizo's Pathfinder. Maybe Mingshi do Singlish translation of Pathfinder, lah? Also bringing back from the dead a Silver Gryphon talking about reviving old classic DragonQuest, but so is Red Brick - Mingshi puts her dollars on the Brick; New Zealand, now true home of the game!

Because not enough Star Trek voyages, new D20 Modern/Future game by Amarillo Design Bureau called "Prime Directive Modern Edition". This of course, same people who give to you Prime Directive RPG, the original, GURPS Prime Directive, and already D20 Prime Directive. So now you can take Enterprise to all sorts of different game systems, some very same same, but different!

So new year for Mingshi as well. This year is metal rabbit, so I expect you do cyberpunk Bunnies & Burrows this year! Here, I make special character just for you!



Name: Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog

AKA: Dynamite ("That rabbit's dynamite")

Appearance: Cute white fluffy bunny with twitching pink nose surrounded by bone.

ST 18    Damage: 1d+2 base bite

DX 18    SPD 7

IQ 9

HT 10

Combat Reflexes, High Pain Threshold, Toughness, Flight

Overconfidence, Strength for Bite Only

ESP 5 levels. Telesend 12-, Instill Fear 15-

Acrobatics 18-, Bun Fu 18- (Flying Bite 22-) Camouflage 15-, Flight 18-, Running 16-, Tactics 15-, Stealth 14-.

Cyberclaws +1 damage, +1 climbing Cyberteeth +2 damage.

That all from me this quartering!

Love & kisses, Mingshi! [mingshi@rpgreview.net](mailto:mingshi@rpgreview.net)

# SEVERAL CYBERPUNK RPG REVIEWS

*by Lev Lafayette and Steven Lindsey*

*The following is a set of recent reviews that dealt with cyberpunk and near future roleplaying games that were all recently published on rpg.net; Cyberpunk 20.20, Shadowrun 2nd edition, Cyberspace, GURPS Cyberpunk and The Corporation were by Lev Lafayette. Traveller Supplement 8 was by Steven Lindsey. Some of the games that were not reviewed, but we rather wish we did include the recently released Freemarket by Jason Morningstar, Earth/Cybertech for Traveller 2300 by GDW, Mayfair Game's Underground, Cyberhero by Hero Games, OGL Cybernet by Mongoose Publishing and GURPS Transhuman Space and Biotech by Steve Jackson Games. Apologies for the limitations of time and space.*

## Cyberpunk 20.20

### Background and Product

Strap in and enjoy the ride, this was the game for all the seriously hip on the gaming block c1990. The raw and edgy Cyberpunk 1st edition, those three thin books in a deep black box were transmogrified into a single 246 page softback, colour cover, solid binding, and Doug Anderson's cover art looks like it had the attitude right. The internals had some good art, although context is only by accident, and has too many peroxide blondes, and worse still carrying large guns in stiletto boots. I dare you to fire an assault rifle in stilettos whilst running. Yeah, I'm sure it can be done; style over substance is the credo.

There is two-column justified throughout with side-bars, which is just nice. Not so nice is the san-serif font. Often, all too often, the sidebars are mostly or entirely empty. Chapter headings on top-right, page numbers bottom-right, all good, but what is this large margin block "View from the Edge" and "All Things Dark and Cyberpunk"? The book is sixteen chapters plus "screamsheets", ranging from Netrunner (47 pages) to Drugs (2 pages). It's perhaps easier to consider these a collections of chapters for "Characters and System", "Combat", "Netrunning" and "Other Material". There is a fair one-page table of contents but no index.

Mike Pondsmith's (et al) language is very informal, sometimes abrasive, and often very verbose. Again, it's style over substance and sure they've got the style right. There are a few typographical errors. There's plenty of attitude in this book. But y'know... I'm sure the 1st edition did just as well with less than half the page count.

### Characters and System

There are ten "roles" in Cyberpunk, equivalent to character classes and each has a special ability, usable only by that role. They are Rockerboy (Charismatic Leadership), Solo (Combat Sense), Netrunner (Interface), Techie (Jury Rig), Medtech (Medical Tech), Media (Credibility), Cop (Authority), Corporate (Resources), Fixer (Streetdeal), Nomad (Family). Each role has a fairly unnecessary page of purely descriptive text, except for the MedTech who receives a passing mention.

Characters are built on points; either 9d10 (random), 1d10 for each of the 9 stats (random) or with values from 50 to 80 according to the Referee (cinematic). The stats are Intelligence, Reflexes, Cool, Technical Ability, Luck, Attractiveness, Movement Allowance, Empathy, and Body (Strength, Endurance and Constitution combined). Having a separate stat for Movement Allowance is a little different and I've developed a twitch when I see Technical Ability as an attribute. The Body stat is used to determine Save (roll under) against stunning attacks and mortality checks, and the Body Type Modifier is a reduction in the effects of damage due to physical brawn.

A quick-character generation system is provided for "Fast and Dirty Expendables" before moving on the character's lifepath for those with a minimum of narrative permanence. A series of random (and some chosen) rolls determines dress and personal style, family origins, parental status, childhood environment, siblings, motivations, values, and life-events friends, enemies, romance, major events. Sometimes these will seemingly contradict the generated stats; e.g., a character who likes people but also rolled a low Empathy. My estimation is that this process will take an additional *forty* plus die rolls. Good idea, but very poor execution.

The game system is skill plus stat plus 1d10 against target number. Given that stats typically range between 1 and 10, and skills also between 1 and 10, this means that the random element is 1/3 of the total score in most cases. This contrasts to most RPGs with similar resolution methods where the random element is equal to or significantly more than the skill and stat contribution, whether the system is roll high versus target number or roll low. A portion of a character's Luck may also be added to the roll with the total amount available per session. There is a small selection of sample action times and modifiers. A roll of 1 on the d10 results on a fumble with varied results according to the skill area, a roll of 10 gives a critical success and an additional 1d10.



Characters begin with 40 points to distribute among 10 career skills, specified for each role. For example, a Nomad has Notice, Endurance, Melee, Rifle, Drive, Basic Tech, Wilderness Survival, Brawling and Athletics. Further, characters also get their REF + INT as points in other, non-career skills, as "pickup skills". Each skill receives around a paragraph of explanation. Where examples are provided of ability it is given in skill levels even though the game mechanic operates on target numbers, meaning that some of the descriptions can be significantly off-target if the character has an extreme related stat. Certain skills have a difficulty rating which represents a multiple for improvement; each skill "costs" the current skill level times ten in "Improvement Points", gained through study (about 1 per day), training (1-5 per day) and experience (awarded on the spot through use). Oddly the game recommends not to award more than 6



points per skill per session even though the awards chart for use goes up to 9. Characters can also acquire Reputation Points, to a single Reputation statistic but the application is frankly incomprehensible due to varying reputations from diverse actions.

A standard 'outfit' is provided to all character roles, with the assumption of a basic, mobile, lifestyle. Special ability levels determine variable occupational monthly disposable incomes. All characters are assumed to have been employed for 1d6/3 (!) months. Weapons are the first major item on the equipment list with over almost forty possible firearms and heavy weapons, eleven melee weapons and fourteen types of armour are provided in their full statistical glory. This is supplemented with a few pages of more mundane "other" equipment with delightfully variable prices for housing, fashion, meals and groceries.

Just under twenty-five pages is dedicated to cyberwear, "putting the cyber into the punk", as the chapter is entitled. Immediately we are introduced to the notion of cyberpsychosis, a loss of 1 EMP for every 10 Humanity Cost that cyberwear brings. Therapy can restore 2 HC per week, or 2 EMP per week if the cybernetics are removed. It must be noted that cyberpunk was the game that introduced this thematic system component and deserves serious kudos for this. Cyberwear covers cosmetic changes, neuralware, a variety of implants, a small selection of biowear, cyberweapons, and cyberoptics. In addition to these are various chipware, mental implants, providing instant skills according to the level of the chip. The physical based chips require time for the body to adjust to the program, at a rate of 1 day per level.

### **Combat System and Injuries**

The combat system in Cyberpunk 20.20 is significantly changed from first edition, and mainly for the better; characters acting three times as fast as others and dodging bullets at point blank range are two example improvements. Combat is carried out in rounds of 3 seconds each, with initiative based on 1d10+REF, +1/level for Solos), who are <i>very</i> fast. Snapshots are allowed with +3 initiative, but -3 to hit. A successful ambush (contest between Stealth and Awareness) give +5 to hit for one round. Target numbers for ranged attacks are based on distance and hit location is rolled when a successful shot hits; defenders do not get to dodge against ranged combat, their only protection being what is in the way, what armour they are wearing and a tough body type. If damage gets through to the last level they still take a point of damage regardless. For comparative purposes a light pistol does 1d6 damage, a medium 2d6 and a heavy 3d6. The amazingly common in actual play kevlar t-shirt stops 10 points of damage. A character's body score will stop 0 to 4 points of damage.

Automatic weapons are capable of three-round-bursts at close and medium ranges, providing a +3 bonus to hit, with 1d6/2 hits actually scored. The bonus to hit plus the prospect of multiple hits makes this an excellent choice in most circumstances. The full auto rules are a little strange for every 10 rounds at close range add one to the attack total; however at medium, long and extreme range - to simulate recoil - subtract one for every 10 rounds fire. The number of actual hits is the attack score minus the hit number. Suppressive fire can be achieved by laying a number of rounds over an area in metres; an Athletics test is required for anyone entering the area (Athletics plus REF plus 1d10) with a target number of the number of rounds divided by the area. A failed test means that the character is hit by 1d6 rounds.

Special and individual rules exist for "unusual" ranged weapons, such as laser, microwave beam weapons, taser etc. Most are sensible and easy to perform, with the exception of the microwave weapon special effects which requires particular cybernetics as a random rolls (e.g., cybervision shorts out). Area effect weapons include shotguns, grenades, gases, flamethrowers, miners, missiles and assorted explosives. Weirdly, the system got it 'right' when it described the effects of shotguns at close range compared to distance and then ignored this when managing the effects of explosives, where an all-or-nothing system is used for the blast radius.

Melee combat is handled slightly differently to ranged combat. In this case, a contested roll is made between attacker and defender. There is a number of bonuses which particular martial arts styles can provide in such actions (e.g., kick, disarm, hold, escape etc). Dodging and parrying, announced at the start of the turn, impose penalties for other actions.

Damage modifiers can come from Strength and, in extreme cases, Body. A punch does a mere 1d6/2 damage (a switchblade the same!), a \*cough\* sword does 2d6+2.

Several pages, not surprisingly, are dedicated to healing and drugs. When wounds are taken their value is checked off in four-point blocks with gradual effects, Light, Serious (Stun -1), Critical (Stun -2), Mortal, Mortal 1, Mortal 2, Mortal 3 etc. All characters thus have the same number of hit points, but remember that having a high Body reduces the damage received. At the Mortal level a check has to be taken each turn, with a failed roll meaning death. Stabilisation by medics, a target number based on the damage received, is the only prevention. Even if a character is stabilised they will continue to take damage if they do not receive further medical attention. First aid heals one point every two days, use of medical tech 1 point per day, adding nanotech healing devices heals and additional point per day. Body banks provide spare parts and with the option of vat-grown tissue banks. Body sculpting, including exotic fashion, is available. Most of the drugs described have no beneficial properties in a system sense.

### **Netrunner**

Several pages are spent introducing this chapter describing an icon-driven cyberspace which supposedly improves the reaction speed of humans plugged into this world. Netrunners engage in the virtual world with interface plugs or 'trodes and cyberdecks, whose key characteristics are memory (default 10 units), speed (default 0), data walls (default 2) and the programs they carry. Programs themselves are rated by their strength, cost and memory units used, which on a typical deck means that the netrunner is limited to 3-5 programs. Programs are also experienced by the netrunner in a science-fantasy worldview.

The general layout of the Net on the international scale is reasonable enough; long-distance links connect major cities, each with their own security rating and a trace value. But when the game reaches the mainstay of the hacking enterprise; entry into other systems, or "datagrids" in the parlance of the game, things go quite comically. Laid out on a literal grid, designed to work with crossword puzzles, each CPU is marked with four adjacent memories, and adjacent to these are various input/output devices (terminals are amazingly expensive!), file systems, security programs etc. Although these are associated with a particular memory unit, they are located elsewhere on the system "subgrid". Worse still, each system is enclosed by "data walls" which can be literally bashed down by an electronic assault, or entered through a "code gate". In other words, the Net is the dungeon crawl of Cyberpunk.

The game system for netrunning has some quirky moments as well. Combat rounds are conducted second-by-second in the net, as opposed to the normal three second rounds in the physical world. This can be problematic in actual play as the one netrunner can dominate a session when their actions occur in parallel with those who are in meatspace. Initiative in the net is determined by the computer's INT + 1d10 versus the 'runners Ref + Deck Speed + 1d10. Computer INT is 3 times the number of CPUs they have, attacks can be carried out under "line of sight" (other "objects" in the way) and "range" (twenty grid units). Stealth and evasion, attacks against systems and decks, are carried out on the attacking program's STR + 1d10 versus the defending program's STR + 1d10. You may note that randomness in the Net is a lot more pronounced, more in line with other RPGs. This reverses however back to the usual scale when anti-personal attacks where the random element is reduced to a lower value than normal with three contributing values plus a 1d10 in a contested roll.

A section writing one's own programs begins with adding difficulty costs, starting from the function (Evasion, Decryption, Detection etc), plus Options (Speed, Recognition, Icon), and Strength. Adding a Demon (apparently a compiler) reduces the Memory Units that the program needs, and a cost of linked strength and speed. The total difficulty costs represents a target number for one or more programmers to reach and the time required to complete the program. Finally, virtual realities are described with a description of their size in memory units; 1 memory unit for a conference room with 100 objects, 16 for a virtual city with 1,000,000 objects, multipliers for realism, addition unit costs for crowds and individuals and so forth.

### **Other Material**

The final block includes history, technology, night city, megacorps and various forms ("screamsheets"). The history, starting at 1990, is charming in how inaccurate it has been to date, but more amusingly degree of histrionics it assumes. The United States invades Latin America, South Africa has a massive bloodbath, arcologies are built, biological chips are built, nuclear war breaks out in the Middle-East reducing the region to slag (but of course, Israel survives), the United States suspends its constitution and goes under martial law, tens of thousands are killed in a Los Angeles earthquake, a moon colony is established... and all this between 1990 and 2000! A Uniform Justice Code has been established in the U.S. when provides the legal basis for the default setting. Vehicles run primarily on liquefied methane (must smell nice) and alcohols. The communications system includes mail (twice a day!), streetside data terminals (Internet kiosks, I suppose), cell 'phones and 'screamsheets' - fax-based newspapers.

A GMs advice chapter gives the sensible advice to immerse oneself in the genre, and immerse the game in the environment as well. Indeed, the game positively encouraged the players to become cyberpunks, at least for the duration of the session, which is what good roleplaying should be. Apart from this however there isn't much else to go on. A sample scenario, Never Fade Away, is written as a short-story with statistical information for running the game in the sidebars. The scenario itself is fairly good, involving a kidnapped beau, who is an expert programmer, of a charismatic rockstar. The writing however is quite awful.

The final chapters are setting-based. The Megacorps 2020 is several pages of general description and then several more of particular company profiles, which oddly does not include discussion of their financial resources, but plenty of the overt and covert military resources. A sample generic location, Nigh City, is useful for quick play, has very violent encounter tables, but is seriously lacking in soul, despite some interesting personalities. Finally the game comes with a selection of 'screamsheets', sample newspaper articles. These are somewhat entertaining, but best of all are used to source no less than ten short scenarios, an excellent contribution.

## Overall

Cyberpunk 2020 was a very popular game, capturing the zeitgeist of the period very effectively from the 1st edition and establishing itself completely with the second. The style is histrionic and somewhat immature at times, but nevertheless managed to carry itself with a great deal of sheer bravado. The game system is fairly simple in principle but suffers numerous rough edges and some downright flaws. The massive netrunning chapter is a disaster, and in actual play, rewriting most of the rules, general design, and presentation proved necessary. The setting history is likewise flawed, although there are a couple of nice touches in the GMs section, and a very handy collection of scenarios.

Style:  $1 + .6 \text{ (layout)} + .7 \text{ (art)} + .7 \text{ (coolness)} + .5 \text{ (readability)} + .7 \text{ (product)} = 4.2$

Substance:  $1 + .6 \text{ (content)} + .3 \text{ (text)} + .8 \text{ (fun)} + .5 \text{ (workmanship)} + .5 \text{ (system)} = 3.7$

## Shadowrun Review

OK chummers, you're probably asking what the drek I'm doing reviewing Shadowrun 2nd edition, when all the talk on the Matrix is about 4th edition with its completely ubiquitous computing, and the change to the core mechanic which instead of quantity of successes against a target numbers uses a quantity of successes with effectively a target number of 5 and glitches are just as common no matter how skilled you are. The fact, chummers, is that I barely know squat (no offensive Dwarf) about 4th edition. It's the first two editions that I played and for most people, this are what they think when they hear the word "Shadowrun". Frag, just look at the range of supplements for those first two editions compared to others.

## **The Book**

The 296 page softback is well-bound, far better than the drek that was the first edition which fell apart faster than a Wage Mage's Essence. The full-colour fold-out political map of North America is a nice touch. The front cover, repeated from the first edition, shows what is a central theme of the game - a gunfight between what is obviously a PC group (an Elven hacker, a gun-bunny, and a mage in a denim bikini and stiletto boots) and a rather anonymous group of corporate opponents. For the record, I cringe at Larry Elmore's portrayal of women. The text is mostly two-column justified with a serif font, thin margins with page numbers and chapter headings. The artwork varies significantly in style, quality and illustrators but is mostly above average with the exception of many of the various colour panels that are scattered throughout the book. Go figure, someone thought it was a good idea to put some of the worst art in the most expensive part of the book. Head days indeed those when FASA was so cashed up...

The writing style jumps between formal and informal, is verbose, tiring to read, and somehow manages not to catch the spirit of the setting. This is a world where magic has returned, where cyberpunk-style technology (including the matrix) is common, and there are various versions of metahumans, such as dwarves, trolls, elves, orcs etc. In short, Shadowrun is the defining example cyberpunk fantasy. Unexpectedly, the introductory short story - a component of games I usually dislike - is quite good. After this some setting information, then a short and efficient chapter on core game concepts, a character generation chapter, combat, magic, the matrix, critters, gear and the Northwest setting. The book concludes with some errata from previous supplements, and charts and tables. The four-page table of contents is well-supplemented by a six-page index.

## **Game Concepts, Character Generation and Skills**

The core game concepts are sufficiently simple to express in a paragraph. Shadowrun is based on d6 dice pools versus a target number and 6s are open-ended. If all dice are rolled '1', then a fumble occurs. Special dice pools exist for dramatic activity such as Combat, Control (Vehicles), Hacking and Magic. Characteristics include attributes, skills and spells. Attributes are grouped into three groups of three, Physical (Body, Quickness, Strength), Mental (Intelligence, Willpower, Charisma) and Special (Essence, Magic, Reaction), which are limited by race, with a normal human range of 1 to 6. Skills can be specialised and, even further, concentrated. Damage consists of stun damage (including fatigue) which leads to unconsciousness and wounds. Weapons have a damage code which expresses the base damage caused (Light, Moderate, Serious, Deadly). Karma is acquired by character experience and use for improvement. Magic is differentiated into the naturalistic hermetic and spiritual shamanistic. Spells are gauged by Force and cause a loss of fatigue called Drain. In the matrix, a decker appears as a persona and encounters constructs.

Got that chummers? Good, let's design a character.

The easy method is simply to select one of sixteen archetypes, a pre-generated character, complete with background, commentary, attributes, skills initiative, dice pools, cyberwear, contacts, spells, and gear, including cash. The other method is design your own, starting from a priority system from Race, Magic, Attributes, Skills and Resources. Select one of the categories as your first priority, then work your way down the categories in order of preference. Humans make up 'B', 'C', 'D' and 'E' on the race category, so if you're going to play a human you may as well take the lowest category. The magic category also has two blank slots at 'D' and 'E', so you're going to play a human non-magic using character nothing is lost by allocating another low preference (adepts are a lower preference than shamans and hermetic mages). Attributes vary from 30 points (A) to 15 points (E) in a uneven progression and modified by race. Likewise with an uneven development Skills from 40 points (A) to 17 points (E). Resources provide cash and Force Points to buy spells and foci for magic using characters. This ranges from 1,000,000/50 (A) to 500/5 (E). Apart from gear, Resources can also be used to buy contacts, followers and the like. I remember my first character fondly, having selected category A as my first preference, I then went on to cover most of the city with buddies, contacts, and a gang. It's all about networks, believe me. Finally, one can optionally gain additional benefits by taking an allergy.

OK, seriously, that's it. Well, apart from twenty inane questions about your character background which has no



integration whatsoever in the game system.

There are thirty-five skills in Shadowrun, with one hundred and fifteen plus specialisations. The future is clearly



interested in social complexes, as sociology is skill, but also lawless, as law is not available. On the other hand, this is one of very few games where there is more choice in the Vehicles Skills category than there is in the Combat Skills category. Skill levels determine the number of d6s that are rolled against a target number, from 2 for simple tasks, 4 for average tasks, 8 for strenuous and 10 for nearly impossible. A skill web provides a series of defaults with each point of distance adding +2 to the target number. So, if a character has no skill levels in Firearms they can default from Quickness at +4, or Gunnery at +2. Some of the defaults can get quite elaborate, especially from Intelligence which can default to Physical Sciences at +6 then to Biotechnology at an additional +8. Or you can simply follow the path directly from Intelligence at +10.

### **Combat...**

Taking up just over 100 pages of the text the rules of combat, magic and the matrix make up a systematic and narrative core of Shadowrun; after all, what is this game about if it isn't combat, magic and the matrix? It's not as if we're playing Papers & Paychecks, chummer, we're making a Shadowrun. Despite taking up more than a third of the text and being of central importance to story development (yes, you could do Shadowrun without metahumans), the three chapters have sufficient similarity to be discussed in the same block, not the least being their temporal equivalence. In most cases all are run with three second combat rounds, with potential multiple actions. "An action ... is a character's attempt to do something. Firing a gun, casting a magic spell, and activating a computer program are some typical actions"; see what I mean?

Initiative is equal to one or more d6, based on various enhancements plus the character's base reaction, the average of their Quickness and Intelligence. The value generated is the character's Combat Phase which determines when they act. Multiple actions are possible, with a number of actions equal to their Initiative divided by 10, with the sequence determined at the initiative -10 for each action; a character with initiative 40 will act on phases 40, 30, 20 and 10. Actions include free actions (e.g., drop object), Simple Actions (e.g., change position, command a spirit, fire weapon) or Complex Actions (cast spell, melee, reload firearm, use skill). A character may take one free action and either two simple actions or one complex action. So really, "an action" could mean three actions (one free, two simple). One can also cancel an a more complex action for a simpler one.

As mentioned, actions are carried out with pools which are refreshed each combat turn. Characters with multiple phases will need to split their pool across this multiplicity, or engage in un-pooled (i.e., purely skill based) or non-pooled actions. The combat pool is based on Quickness, Intelligence and Willpower. A control pool for vehicles is based on the character's Reaction, modified by their vehicle control rig. The hacking pool is based on the character's computing skill (plus concentrations or specialisations) plus any cyberdeck response circuitry. The magic pool is based on their Sorcery Skill rating (plus concentrations or specialisations) plus any foci or totem modifiers.

Ranged combat is a central feature of cyberpunk games and Shadowrun is no different in this regard. Range determines the base target number from Short (4) to Extreme (9). Maximum weapon ranges are particularly poor, with even sniper rifle reaching but a paltry 400m. Various modifiers exist for recoil, target movement, smart-links and aiming. Note that if you are untrained with a weapon you cannot aim. Successes from the final target number are compared with a damage resistance test based on the Body attribute with a target number based on the Power Rating of the weapon minus armor. Every two successes in favour of the attacker or the damage resistance changes the default weapon damage by one stage, along the levels of Light, Moderate, Serious or Deadly. In addition characters shot must make a

Body test equal to one half of the Power of the attack. Other modifications exist for called shots, bursts and autofire, and stray shots, along with special rules for shotguns, grenades, and missile launchers. The rules for melee combat are similar with the single main exception being a defender test (to represent dodges, parries etc) in addition to the damage resistance test. Vehicles in combat receive some attention, particularly in relation to control and movement, and especially crashing and ramming.



Stop bleeding on the floor! Damage in Shadowrun is applied along two tracks, Stun and Physical with the former leading into the latter; lots of stun starts to equate to additional physical damage. At certain, identical, levels on the two tracks (light, moderate, serious, deadly), modifications occur, such as reductions in initiative and increases to target numbers. Healing from Stun is relatively quick; more like simple recovery. Physical damage varies significantly by the degree of damage with minimum levels of care and varied target numbers. For example deadly wounds have a base recovery time of 30 days, a target number of 10 and require hospitalisation. Healing is based on a Body Test against the noted target number with doctoring modifications; more a case of circumstances than any medical skill. Assuming recovery from Deadly Wounds the prospect for permanent damage exists. Magicians of all types find it more difficult to heal through normal means.

## **.. Magic..**

There are three paths in the Shadowrun magic system; shamanism, the hermetic and the adept. Any character with a Magical rating is considered to be a magician. Shamans are associated with an animal totem chosen by the PC, which provide specific bonuses. The rat totem, for example, gives +2 dice to detection and illusion spells, and conjuring Spirits of Man. To learn spells, a shaman must spend time in a Medicine Lodge which can be transportable or permanent. In contrast the hermetic tradition which studies magic from a theoretical, bookish, perspective and require libraries for sorcery, conjuring and magical theory; they can exist in softcopy format, and they can be shared - most universities will have a magic library. Specific spells require a hermetic circle for ritual sorcery and conjurations. Finally the adept represents a limited and specialised form of magician, such as a shaman who can only cast spells or conjure spirits associated with the totem, or a hermetic magic who can only have sorcery or conjuration, or a physical adept who uses their magical rating to increase attributes, senses and skills; martial arts are common. Spellcaster's often use a foci (oddly this is squeezed in between sorcery and conjuration) to enhance their spell casting. They are available for specific spells, categories, weapons etc. Mention must also be made of 'astral space' a parallel dimension where magical entities co-exist. Skills such as astral perception help sense magical energies, and projection involves the separation of the physical body form the essence of the character, appearing as an idealised self-image in astral space, a place where real world kilometres can be passed in seconds.

Sorcery is used to cast spells. Spells are differentiated between Physical and Mana types and categorised as combat, detection, health, illusion and manipulation. A spell's Force is its power; the Range of a spell is touch (health), limited by Force (detection) or line of sight (others); the Drain level is the degree of damage the magician takes (usually stun); Duration (instant, sustained, permanent); and Exclusivity, meaning that it cannot be stacked with another spell. Spell casting is a Complex Action, but may be stacked with a +2 modifier to all target numbers to each spell stacked. Spell casting is a process of making a success test, based on the Force of the spell plus any Magic pool adds, against a target number. If applicable, the target may make a spell resistance test based on Body (physical spells) or Willpower (mana spells), or a damage resistance test. Finally the magician must make a drain resistance test based on Willpower against an individual spell formula, based on the modified Force of the spell. Ritual sorcery allows several magicians to combine their expertise and to cast at targets not in visual range with a material link or astral guiding. Typically taking hours, and thankfully excluding combat spells, it also involves materials per point of Force. Eighty or so spells are given some description, with a fair number being elaborations of lower levels (e.g., Cure L Disease, Cure M Disease, Cure S Disease etc). It would be wrong to describe them as being particularly interesting.

Conjuring is used to summon, control and banish spirits. Spirits have a Force rating which determines its abilities, and the difficulty of controlling it. The main types of spirits are Nature spirits (shaman tradition only) and Elemental spirits (hermetic tradition only). Nature spirits can only be summoned from within that spirits domain and come with their own powers. The Force of the spirit summoned sets the target number of the conjuring test. Each success represents one service the spirit will carry out for the shaman. Regardless of success, a Charisma-based drain test is undertaken with the force of the spirit equalling the target number. Summoning elemental requires a conjuring library, a hermetic circle, materials, an elemental source and plenty of time. Again the number of successes equals the number of services the elemental will perform. Spirit combat is a too simple case of the Force of one spirit being used as the pool of dice with the force of the other spirit being the target number. Control over spirits can be contested.

## **.. and The Matrix**

The Matrix is the cyberspace of Shadowrun with interaction through the usual method of a cyberdeck and a physical implant. Programs and internal systems have their own representations, as does the decker's construct, or persona. Movement is more or less instantaneous with the exception of encountering nodes that require passcodes, which have various success requirements from an Computer skill test to bypass. Intrusion Countermeasures (IC) are categorised as active or passive., white, gray or black, the latter designed to physically attack the decker. Cyberdecks are measured in hardening (armour), active memory (program complexity capacity) and storage memory, load speed (from storage to memory), input/output speed (which supposedly means connection speed to other systems!), and cost. In addition there is a on-chip Master Persona Control Program (MPCP) which establishes the Body, Evasion, Masking and Sensors rating of the persona in the Matrix. In addition to the persona programs there is a small range of utility and combat utility programs. Combat in the Matrix is at the same rate as 'real world' combat, with three second phases, initiative, sensor and contact and the usual combination of dice pool versus target number and resistance tests.

## **Contacts, Critters and Gear**

The last one hundred or so pages consist of a 'Behind The Scenes' chapter (i.e., GMs advice), Contacts, Critters and Gear, and finally a short section on Seattle and the Northwest and sourcebook updates. Other skills (social, vehicle, knowledge, language and perception) receive some traction in the GMs chapter, for reaction and racism, for building and repairing etc. Improvements in attributes and skills are achieved by Karma, which is earned through surviving and succeeding in a mission and for the degree of danger. One-tenth of the character's total Karma goes into a Karma pool which can be used each encounter to re-roll failures, avoid fumbles and buy additional dice and successes. Further there is a Team Karma pool as a further resource pool.

The twenty-two contacts, based on profession, are primarily a stat-block with a couple of cute quotes and are remarkably handy for an instant-NPC with just enough of a plot hint to get a story going. Critters are described with a range of powers (animal control, electrical projection, enhanced sense, essence drain, regeneration, venom) and each of the fifty or so are described quite thoroughly in terms of identification, habitat, magic, behaviour, ecological range, along with a statistics table. And never cut a deal with a dragon. The final major chapter is Gear and their not joking. Several pages of things that go bang and bomb, a couple of pages of finding and hiding, a couple of pages on entertainment and several pages on cyberwear implants which deplete Essence attributes (very bad for magicians), biotech, and a couple of pages of vehicles. The statistic pages for the gear runs for a hefty twelve pages, although there is plenty of whitespace.

The chapters on the Northwest and Seattle are not terribly exciting; there is a modicum of interest in providing a 'Lonely Planet' guide to the main sights and a few comments on the range of races that live in the area. But the description lacks a narrative tension that makes it particularly dynamic place to be. A sample scenario at this point would have been very useful; especially after getting through some 275 pages. Finally, the game concludes with sourcebook upgrades for material that was published with the first edition rules. Most of this is modifications to the Street Samurai Catalog, but with minimal and useful changes to other supplements.

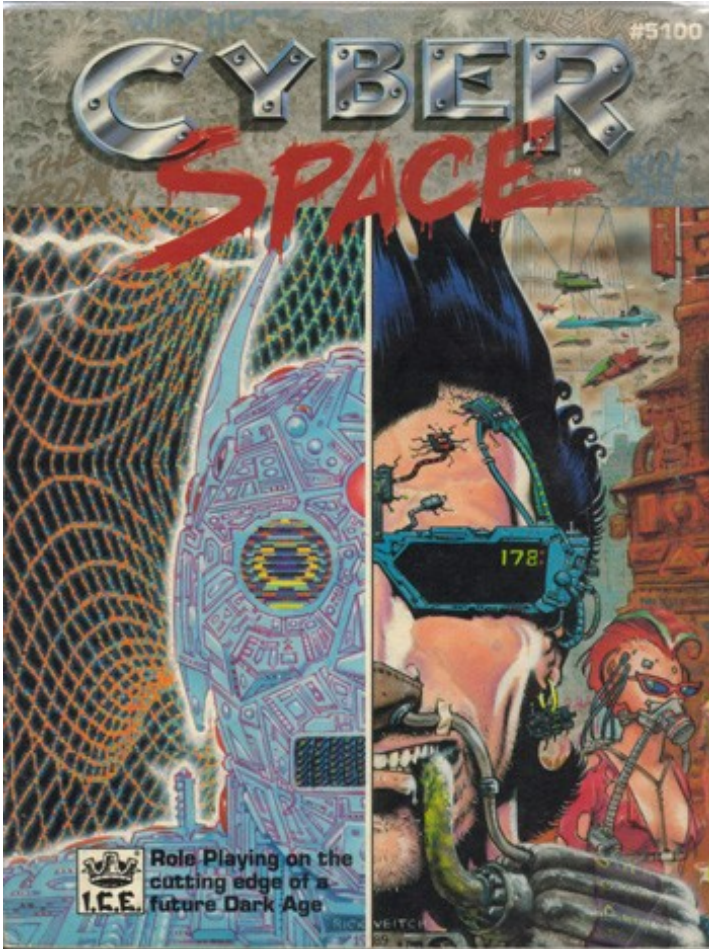
## **Tolkien in Cyberspace?**

Shadowrun is in some ways a disappointing product. The marketing is, of course, quite clever managing to combine fantasy and cyberpunk in a manner that is remotely plausible for the genre and allowing for a development of a game system which appeals to the players with an interest in combat, or magic and magic creatures, or cyberspace - but with only a fairly minimal nods in the direction of other skills. But there is also a wealth of the core material, and plenty of supplementary material (critters, contacts and gear), although reading through the rulebook is often like wading through a swamp. The game is very badly written, although is somewhat saved by a good table of contents and an excellent index.



As for the game system it must be said that the core mechanic is used universally and without too many seriously odd results. The problem is the core mechanic involves dice pools, which were an interesting experiment for the 1990s, but have largely been considered problematic - they are just too inefficient in actual play especially when combined with open-ended die rolls and target numbers.

Despite these criticisms Shadowrun is certainly a worthy game to play, once you get beyond the slight misrepresentation of the game being 'Tolkien in Cyberspace'. Of course, it is possible to run the game in this fashion (and wasn't the Lord of the Rings a shadowrun of sorts?) there is no requirement to include the typical themes and tropes of fantasy within this setting. Magic may have returned to the world; but the world is not medieval romanticism; it is cyberpunk.



Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .5 (art) + .7 (coolness) + .1 (readability) + .5 (product) = 3.6  
Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .3 (text) + .6 (fun) + .6 (workmanship) + .6 (system) = 3.7

## Cyberspace

There was a time in the late 1980s when there was quite a run on cyberpunk roleplaying games; Cyberpunk (1st edition and 20.20), and Shadowrun were, of course, the big names, and even Traveller 2300 (2300AD) decided to have a shot with the Earth/Cybertech supplement. From the ICE corner of the publishing market, came Cyberspace. It did strike as a little contrived and incongruous at the time. After all, ICE was known for their detail-heavy Rolemaster fantasy RPG, their Middle-Earth line, and a rather space operatic Spacemaster. Nevertheless, author Todd Foley (previously responsible for War on A Distant Moon and Beyond The Core for Spacemaster) stepped up to the task, with a stripped down version of the 'Master' system supplemented with cyberpunk setting and style.

Cyberspace came in a 206 page softcover with cover art from Rick Veitch, representing a juxtaposition of the crowded, polluted cybernetic environment and the abstract neon of cyberspace. It shows some creativity, but the technique is very much comic-book style, which is the illustrator's area of work. The interior art, by Rick Lowry, Angela Bostick, Del Harris, and Karl Martin, is nearly all good, giving a good sense of the style of cyberpunk with some images reminiscent of scenes from books and films of the time. The text is mostly presented in three-column ragged-right with an somewhat annoying sans-serif font, made up however by very clear and common sub-section headings along with obvious chapters heading and numbers on each page. Despite the density of the text finding the relevant material during play was as easily acquired skill.

After a short preface there are six chapters, The System, Running The World, Technology, Cyberspace, an Adventure

and some very handy Appendices. These are supplemented by a good two-page table of contents and a somewhat short one page index. The writing style in the rules is mostly formal, to the point but supplemented with plenty of examples. There are thankfully short narratives introducing each chapter along with interesting occasional box-sections outlining annual events up to the year 2090, when the game is set.

### **Character Generation and System**

The preface provides a short, punchy, introduction to the setting, outline of the book, and game conventions (abbreviations, definitions, the d100 system and open-ended rolls, difficulty levels). After that it's straight into character generation with 11 stats (Constitution, Agility, Self-Discipline, Reasoning, Memory, Strength, Quickness, Empathy, Intuition, Presence and Appearance), each rolled on d100 and distributed according to the player's wishes. These values translate into "stat bonuses" (ranging from +25 to -25 at the normal extremes) which contribute to total skill bonuses; notably Appearance makes no difference in this regard.

Players also choose their character's profession which come with the delightfully appropriate titles of Sleaze (social skills), Sneak (subterfuge), Killer (weapons), Net Junkie (cyberspace), Jockey (general) and Tech Rat (technical). The choice of profession provides a balanced additional bonus to skills based on profession level; for example a Sleaze gains +3/level to social skills, +1/level to general skills and +3/level to perception. After determining profession a random roll determines social class which varies according to profession. The social classes determine the number of starting languages, adolescent skills rank and starting money. Like the professions these are also evocative; Upper, Middle and Lower Corporate, Upper and Lower Sprawl, Resource and Refining Zone, Arcology, Wilds, Urban Homeless, Gypsy, and Space Colony.

Skill ranks are also gained through a character's apprenticeship period and each level gain, with the number of ranks depending on the profession and skill category with specific skills chosen by the player. The optional character background options section includes randomly determined special skills, status, wealth, connections and idiosyncrasies. Injuries, handicaps from past experience, and ambidexterity are likewise randomly determined. Levels are gained through experience points, experience points are gained by successful maneuvers, constructions, combat actions, ideas, and travel.

Skill ranks convert to skill bonuses with diminishing returns. These are added to stat bonuses plus any special background or equipment bonuses. The total is a bonus that is added to a d100 roll, with greater success achieved with higher totals. As mentioned skills themselves consist of a number of categories; Maneuvering, Weapons, General, Subterfuge, Social, Cyberspace, Technical, Special and a small collection of "non-adventuring" Secondary Skills. Specific rules exist for combat, static maneuvers, moving maneuvers, vehicular maneuvers, and construction and research.

The combat system is resolved in ten second rounds with an open-ended d100 roll with offensive bonus added and defensive bonus subtracted. The result is then cross-referenced on a table according to weapon type and armour type and which determines whether any concussion hits or criticals have been scored. If a character is reduced to zero in the former the character is unconscious. The latter gives results according to the attack type for loss of life, limb, bleeding, shock etc. As these are much reduced from their Rolemaster/Spacemaster origins there is a degree of repetition in actual play.

### **The World**

The substantial world chapter begins with an expected theme of multinational corporations increasing dominance with declining nation-state governments. Generic geographic regional overviews neatly correlated with the social status in character generation; corporate cities and suburbs, inner cities and sprawls, resource and refining zones, arcologies and aqualogies, wilderness reserves, wastelands, space colonies and the life of the homeless. Aspects of normal life are described in surprising detail (for RPGs, that is) including family, education, health care (including cloning),

transportation, communications and home entertainment, careers and personal finance (including cost of living), law enforcement and privacy, and neologisms.

Several major corporate entities are described with their primary operations, total assets, employees, branches, executives and major shareholders along with their cyberspace data. A collection of sample gang data is also provided for the San Francisco and Bay Area, the default setting for the game, which follow a simple but accurate format of leadership, size, identifies, and activities. Governments receive only a passing mention, perhaps the greatest thematic error of the genre (more likely, the state will act as the "ideal collective capitalist" to quote Friedrich Engels). Three arcologies and several orbital habitats also receive short descriptions. The chapter continues with several pages (a dozen in total) of "interesting and important" NPCs designated as hostiles, neutrals and patrons with game statistical information and character background before concluding with an overview of San Francisco, with an general overview, a description of the various districts, and almost sixty 'places of interest'.

The opportunity is taken here to give to briefly describe the short adventure which makes up the penultimate chapter of the book, "Hot on the Heels of Love", involving a corporate headhunter who has fallen for a rather likeable woman who wanted to know more than she should about a certain corporation. Apparently lost to the corporations the PCs are hired out to find out what has happened. The scenario is a fairly straight-forward break-and-enter in many respects but contains a couple of appropriate plot-twists to introduce the PCs to the sort of world that they are dealing with.

### **Technology and Cyberspace**

Taking up almost forty percent of the page count, the Technology and Cyberspace chapters are extensive with interest shown in powering of cybernetic devices and functionality from inputs, internals and outputs. Cybernetic systems are rated in Marks, which provide bonuses on the same scale as the skill chart and the bonuses (not the ranks) stack; a clever player will therefore seek a breakpoint at around 10 for both where appropriate for optimal resource use. The game also includes a mental health problem from too much cyberwear; the Cybernetic Implant Rejection Syndrome, or CIRS, which reduces the character Empathy stat, resulting in uncontrollable psychosis if it ever falls below zero.

The cybernetic systems described include a dazzling array of sensory, somatic, physiological, neurological and implementary systems. All told over 130 individual systems are described within these categories, and many have subversions as well. As can be expected there are more than a few interesting specific technologies in such a list; the capacity to transmit and receive tactile sensations over distance between individuals was one that became particularly useful in actual play, for example. Along with such interesting examples all the usual motifs from the genre can be found; Direct Neural Interfaces, Razornails, AI Cyberweapons etc.

Computers also receive their own section with detail on processing power, operating system and applications and input/output devices. Computers are also measured in Mark #s, which each mark representing a "unit" of "CPU space" (read RAM), and ten times those units for storage. An example unit consist of some pretty weird examples, ranging from 1 hour of high fidelity audio (music) to 1000 pages of text. This suggest a range here of 1 unit of storage equating to either 10 megabytes per unit (text) to 60 megabytes per unit (music). Computers also have an overall speed based on processor core technology (silicon, "superchip", magnebubble - the PDP-11 is revived! - and "orgmolec"). The most powerful will take one round (10 seconds) to move one unit of data from storage to memory. Clearly the storage and processing values for a standard Mk 10 computer are well below contemporary standards, and even those a few years after publication of the book. Machine languages and programs also actually cost money.

These criticisms aside the game does provide an interesting cyberspace environment complete with physical feedback counter programs against would-be netrunners being where they shouldn't be. The Cyberspace chapter provides some detail on the user environment, intrusion and combat programs, utilities etc., along with a fairly evocative description and game system steps for travelling through cyberspace and network components and design. Notably missing however, is various wireless technologies with the exception of satellite links.

Other equipment is of the more mundane and recognisable kind; several different clothing options, hairstyles, body armour, tools and powercells, and a variety of weapons (including; "Rock. Yes, a rock. You throw it"), such as rocketguns, needlesguns, gauss guns, lasers for the more science fiction minded. In addition to these are smaller scale data devices ("most are between ... 10 to 100 meg RAM"), various personal accoutrements, physical security systems, medical equipment, and drugs both medicinal and recreational. Vehicles receive an abundant section of their very own, covering several examples for the civilian, commercial, military, and space sectors, along with weapons for the same.

## Overall

Those who perceived Cyberspace as merely a stripped-down version of Rolemaster/Spacemaster in an attempt to cash-in on the popular cyberpunk genre have missed out on an extremely good game. Whilst it is true that the game system is derived from the aforementioned games, the author managed to make the system much easier and thematically appropriate for the setting. The content-rich technologies that densely fill the pages of Cyberspace provide an enormous wealth of resources for player and GM alike, and the year-by-year history provides a very solid backstory.

There are of course, some gaps. Despite arcologies and the wilds being listed as environs there was not even the most basic stats for wild (or artificial) animals. Fully-automated robotic systems could have received further development as well. And, as mentioned, the description for computational power is woefully inadequate. Despite these issues, Cyberspace is a very dense piece of work which oozes style.

In conclusion it is also possible to give a one line review of all the supporting material; all the scenario and settings packs were great, and all supplements were terrible.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .7 (art) + .9 (coolness) + .8 (readability) + .6 (product) = 4.7

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .9 (text) + .8 (fun) + .9 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 5.0

## GURPS Cyberpunk

### A Personal Introduction

*My first encounter with GURPS Cyberpunk must have been in late 1989; a friend of mine, Chris Stronach, had managed to get a hold of the pre-release copy. With some maneuvers he had managed to get the multiple sessions introduced to the programme of the local science fiction convention which had a cyberpunk theme. That was Swancon XV, held in Perth in January 1990. We collected comments from the players, I composed a twenty plus page submission, dutifully sent it off and...*

*... Well, as is well known the offices of Steve Jackson Games were raided by the U.S. Secret Service on March 1st when all the GURPS Cyberpunk material was taken, on the grounds the pending publication was "a handbook for computer crime". About a month later some of the material was returned and GURPS Cyberpunk was published. Alas, apparently without the material that I had sent in and, dammit, without our names on the inside cover as playtesters or commentators. Which is a shame because being listed in GURPS Cyberpunk would have been seriously cool. Maybe one day there'll be a second edition.*

### The Product

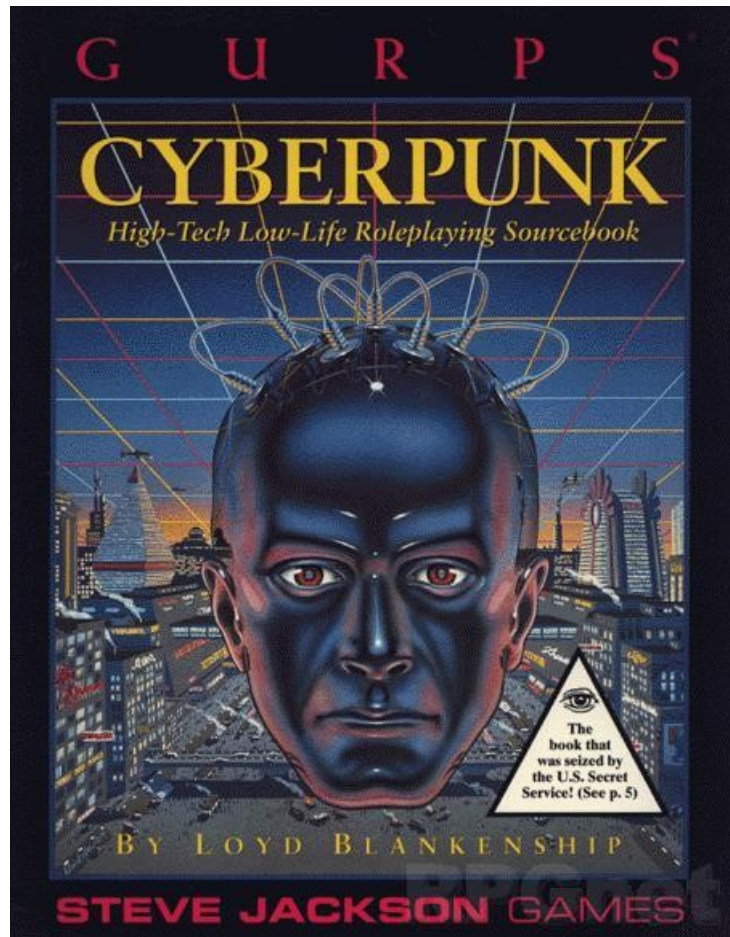


GURPS Cyberpunk is a 128-page softcover designed for the third edition of said system. It has attractive and evocative cover art by David Schleinkofer of a disembodied cyborg head superimposed over a city scene reminiscent of Blade Runner. The internal art is of lower quality (excepting those pieces by Rick Lowry) with occasional contextual appropriateness. The serif justified text varies between one-column with side-bars and two-column. Content-rich, the style jumps between being formal and rules-orientated to being somewhat less formal and speculative. Like all good GURPS books it comes with *random italics*.

Supported with a good table of contents, an index, a glossary, and a bibliography, there are six main chapters whose headings are pretty much self-explanatory: Characters (pp6-28), Cyberwear (pp29-41), Technology and Equipment (pp42-60), Netrunning (pp61-95), World Design (pp96-114) and Campaigning (pp115-112).

#### **Characters**

GURPS Cyberpunk recommends that GMs may want to start their characters with more than the standard 100 character points, as the competition is so tough. Suggested levels include 150 points, 200 points and 250 points. The lower level is considered to be a major disadvantage. This is in addition to 80 points of disadvantages, twice the normal level for GURPS. A sidebar discussion on points-vs-cash for cyberwear underlines a problem faced by the system on how to avoid cashed-up characters (not very cyberpunk) with cyberwear (very cyberpunk), which is expensive. It's an endemic GURPS problem at higher tech levels and the playtest document did include a very simple and effective resolution; split income and wealth. Alas, this was not incorporated for reasons best left to the line editors.



The next ten pages provide descriptive text of potential character types according to the genre; Assassin, Bodyguard, Broker, Celebrity, Cop, Corporate etc. This includes suggested backgrounds, advantages and disadvantages etc. In the main, the descriptive material is too long, mostly obvious, and not enough text is spent on solid recommendations for skill choices, income levels and relationship to the job table, likely social status, equipment and cyberwear choices and so forth. In contrast the review of advantages, disadvantages and skills is solid, providing good examples for inclusion in the milieu and a number of new choices, including 'alternate identity', 'contacts', 'zeroed', 'amnesia', 'terminally ill', 'on the edge' and the new skill 'computer hacking', among others.

#### **Equipment**

The next two chapters deal with equipment, both cyberwear and normal. The text comes with this stated caveat that much of the material is taken from GURPS Ultra Tech, especially for Tech Level 8, and this is largely true, especially for normal equipment. With regards to cyberwear a key difference between GURPS Cyberpunk and GURPS Ultra-

Tech is the existence of bionic modifications in the former, allowing for additional or reduced cost enhancements and limitations on the particular parts, although the cost reduction for parts lacking cosmetic appearance (-50% to -80%) seems a quite high. Apart from that there is a lot more cybernetics than in Ultra-Tech, covering limbs, weapons, all-of-body modifications, many sense organs, mental implants, and neurological interfaces. The mental implants are split between personality chips and physical control chips, such as skill chips. Many of these are not TL 8 in the standard GURPS exploration, but well advanced from that level (such as the Personality Implant), but are appropriate to the setting.

The equipment chapter covers the range of personal weapons expected for the tech-level and largely available in Ultra-Tech. This includes personal weapons (slughthrowers, gauss needlers, gyrocs, lasers, stun wands), heavy weapons (grenades, grenade launchers), armour (monocrys, reflec, exoskeletons), various communications, recording and sensor equipment, personal vehicles, tool kits, security and surveillance systems, and various medical technologies such as braintaping, cloning, and a variety of hypothetical drugs (giving game effects for real drugs is seemingly a taboo area). As with the previous chapter, the technology and equipment chapter is heavy on the content and system integration, but also written in an accessible manner.

### **Netrunning**

For many, the chapter on Netrunning in GURPS Cyberpunk is the highlight of the book. Certainly the author had sufficient knowledge in this field as a member of "computer security" fraternal organisations such as the Legion of Doom and as a contributor to the journal Phrack. Pleasingly, the chapter kicks off with the an option not to have a cinematic 'cyberspace' environment in favour of 'realistic networks' and then describes various computer types defined in scales of complexity. Each level represents ten times the processing power and speed of the proceeding level, so a complexity 2 computer (a household standard), is ten times the speed of a Complexity 1 computer. Software, along with a financial cost, are also rated in terms of complexity; a computer can run two programs of it's own complexity simultaneously and ten programs of a preceding complexity level; note the (probably unnecessary) distinction between multitasking capacity and processing power.

An excellent summary of the development of packet-switched networks is provided, along with a handy list of existing networks c1990. Naturally enough this was prior to the near-universal adoption of the TCP/IP suite, although "APRAnet" and "Internet" are listed as two of the seventeen network names for the United States. For security purposes a distinction is drawn between users and superusers, with optional further detail. A successful upgrade from normal to superuser after is perhaps a little easy. However this is an exception to an otherwise highly realistic, and very well simulated simple and clear explanation of the very basics of computer security.

For a more cinematic flavour, a cyberspace environ is also offered where increasingly expensive neural and graphic environmental interfaces provide heightened speed of interaction; a more realistic alternative which could have maintained the GUI would have been improved skill for basic tasks (i.e., Computer Operations, rather than Programming or Hacking). Cyberspace activity is measured in milliseconds with system complexity provided in the base value with modifications for hardware enhancements and the GUI. Attempts to carry out multiple actions during a phase constitutes a -3 cumulative penalty to the 'runners Cyberdeck Operation skill. Movement through the network between nodes is one phase per 500 mile hops, a very accurate measurement which has it's own apocryphal tale (<http://www.ibiblio.org/harris/500milemail.html>). "Vision" is limited to the complexity rating of the 'deck in hops. "Combat" is carried out by activating the sometimes outrageously expensive programs which usually have a default based on either Cyberdeck (or Computer) Operation, Computer Programming and Computer Hacking. Programs can be ordered according to conditional logic and indeed, players and the GM are encouraged to do so.

Networks are mapped realistically, that is, they have nodes, subnets within the nodes and connections between the nodes and the subnets, with standard icons used to differentiate between system types (academic, banking, military etc). Involvement (and spontaneous generation) of artificial intelligences is included in this direction, a little oddly. An illustrative sample system map and netrun is also provided which aids clarification of any issues.

## World Design and Campaigning

The final two chapters cover the main issues of running a GURPS Cyberpunk campaign. The world design chapter starts with the stylistic elements of a typical cyberpunk setting derived from the portmanteau components of the phrase; urban blight combined with cutting edge technology (computers, medicine, transportation), and the results of such combinations (drugs, organlegging, cyberghouls). The economics section describes the probability of instability in government currency, greater stability in specie-backed money; computer chips are suggested as a popular item for barter. The unregulated corporate world, a corpocracy is described as a techno-feudalism, and the dangers of quasi-monopolies. Some space is dedicated to work, income and changes of foodstuffs of the post-industrial economy.

A range of governments is described with a passing head-nod to cyberpunk literary convention as the norm. No attempt is made to assign government types to socio-economic conditions. Governments and societies are defined by Control Ratings which determine the degree of control. There is the additional challenge of international relations between the breakup of the state into smaller components and its balancing form in the form of united economic and political communities. There is a brief discussion of wars, with an emphasis on a winding-down of conventional wars by nation-states in favour of increasingly exact strikes. In according with the literature, there is an assumption that a cyberpunk setting "will include a high degree of personal and societal violence... [t]errorism will take many forms in the future." Other issues of societal descriptions include crime and punishment, with a special reference to corporate relation to crimes. Arcologies and city services are described under urbanisation. Changes to family structure, including same-sex relationships, contractual periods and the problems with clone marriages and "vat babies" are discussed. Hypertexted and individually selected news is considered probable, along with an expansion of private publication.

The Campaigning chapter debates the relative virtues of campaign realism, the scope of the story, the hidden agenda within the plotline, the thematic importance of incorporating technological change, political, economic and even religious struggles, the difficulties of generating a workable group dynamic with characters which are typically antisocial, and crossing with other genres (Special Ops, Space on one level, Fantasy and Supers on the other). Adventure, rather than campaign themes (read: narratives), are also given brief mention.

## Overall

In substance, there are many areas where this book excels; the Netrunning chapter was certainly the best for its time and stands up well today. The cyberwear and equipment chapters are also excellent content-heavy chapters. The system rules for characters is likewise excellent. The rest of the book however is a little light on content. This is not to suggest that there are any game-breaking features, or descriptive text that is patently wrong, it is just that it often took a lot of reading to find something that wasn't fairly obvious or a particularly interesting angle on an old problem. The World Design and Campaign in particular often read like page filler. Stylistically, The product, presentation, layout, organisational work and readability is very good. The only real negative here was some of the internal artwork.

Overall GURPS Cyberpunk is a very good piece of work. Perhaps not deserving of being the subject of a Secret Service raid, and certainly not a handbook on computer crime (except to mention trashing and 'social engineering'). Interestingly, it not actually a necessity for cyberpunk games; one can manage quite adequately with Ultra-Tech and the right information attitude for example (cyberspace rules aside). Overall however, it is recommended as an easy summary of available technology, for the netrunning rules, and as a moderately good source of ideas.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .5 (art) + .9 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .7 (product) = 4.5

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .6 (text) + .8 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 4.5

## Corporation Review

## The Product

Corporation is released by Mongoose Games, under their Flaming Cobra of independents, in this case, Brutal Games. It's a beautifully bound hardback, absolutely rock solid in production qualities and lies quite flat when opened. The 256 page text is two column justified, sans-serif (not a good look for print, great for online), with boxed page numbers and chapter titles in the modest margins, top right and top left respectively. This is supplemented by boxed italic text providing short, descriptive narratives, and sectioned text to highlight specific rules. The cover is simple but evocative, a group of four Agents (think covert ops, men in black etc) overlooking a misty river with a spire and an old city in the background. The internal art is competent and evocative, presenting the cyberpunk and special agent setting which is central to the game. Unfortunately the printing is far too dark and much of the detail of the internal artwork has been

lost in production. I've been told the clarity of the artwork is superior in the full-colour PDF version of the game.



The book is broken up into thirteen chapters, made explicit by a very clear two-page table of contents, with a three page index supplementing. After a brief introduction the game dives right into Character Generation followed by four chapters assisting the process (Equipment, Cybernetics, Telepathics, Character Advancement), and two chapters of central setting information for characters (The Corporations, the UIG and the Order of the Truth Faith). It is well into the book (chapter 8, p137) until the actual game system is explained, and this brief chapter (13 pages) is followed by supplementary setting information for the next three (The World in 2500, The Cities, People and Places). The last two chapters are GM aids, including sample scenarios and sample NPCs (Running Corporation, Antagonists).

### Character Generation and System

Character generation is based around building an Agent who works for one of five corporations, of which selecting the first part of character generation. Naturally enough it is expected that all PCs join the same corporation and each party has a Division Leader. The five corporations are Ai-Jinn (effectively China), Comoros (Indo-Africa), Eurasian (Europe, Russia), Shi Yukiro (Japan),

Western Federation (US etc). Each corporation has its own particular benefit and specialisation; the Western Federation, for example, specialise in military equipment, the Comoros in telepaths etc. The second step is concept (a broad description of what the character is, e.g., Detective, Morale Officer, Weapons Scientist). This will help define a professional skill for the character.

The seven stats (Agility, Endurance, Intelligence, Perception, Presence, Reflexes, Strength) are assigned either by allocating 7 points to each and then adding or subtracting on a 1-to-1 basis with a maximum of 10 and a minimum of 5, or, 49 points with the same minimum or maximum. Yes, that is the same thing. There are also derived stats for Hit Points, Telepath Energy etc. One key feature to note at this point is that the Agents are about 50% better than normal



humans in all regards. Agents also have Conviction, which provides a bonus in desperate situations.

Skills are assigned with pre-determined levels (1 at level 8, 1 at level 7, 1 at level 6, 3 at level 5 etc), which makes generation a little faster in play with some loss of flexibility. The list of some twenty-five skills comes with fairly minimal description, with the occasional mention of modifications. PCs will start with at least some level of learning in around 80% of the listed skills. In addition to skills there are some thirty-five trainings, specialist areas of expertise, of which half are combat-based. Most of these are all-or-nothing affairs (e.g., Advanced Disarm, Defensive Fighting etc). In a latter chapter the seven skills dedicated to telepathic powers are described; these are evaluated by level and are powered by recoverable telepathic endurance points. As initial equipment, Agents are able to purchase licenses, provided by the United International Government. These often come with skill level and rank prerequisites, and are used for carrying particular equipment (e.g., Heavy Firearm License), having particular authorities (e.g., Public Appropriation License), are particular professions (e.g., Preachers License). More mundane equipment is valued according to quality and covers an expected range of weapons (lots of these, many pages), armour, toxins and drugs, and a range of "general equipment" (environment suits, toolkits, translators etc), process and task chips (which provide skill bonuses), and a handful of vehicles (but including mecha!). A short chapter is dedicated to cybernetics, particularly notable for providing the capacity to raise stats over 10 and being susceptible to EMP. Different companies dominate parts of the cybernetic market in a form of monopolistic competition, such as Anascan for optical technologies, Datanetica for field processing and so forth.

Character advancement is through rank points, experience points and mission pay. Rank points are determined by the corporation, the UIG or a combination thereof, and is used to gain licenses, vehicles, housing, improve in the hierarchy and so forth. Experience points are awarded by the GM for "good roleplaying" at a rate of 3-5 per session; these are used to improve skills (costing at current rating), stats (double current rating) and the like. Agent level is an abstract value based on experience points. Mission pay is based on rank times base mission pay with a bonus based on relative success; the Comoros pay the worst, the Eurasians the best. 'Downtime' is a period between missions, which gives the opportunity to improve equipment, gain mission rewards, and possibly receive punishments.

The game system is based on 2d10 roll under Stat+Skill, with doubles providing criticals with a success and fumbles for a failure. How much the roll is made by determines the degree of success and with generic modifiers given a bonus from +4 (very easy) to -12 (nearly impossible). When carrying out actions, skill and stat are loosely coupled. Combat is summarised as encounter-based initiative (d10 + reflexes), 'to hit' rolls based on the mechanic described above, roll damage, subtract armour. There are spot rules for move/attack combinations, mixed attacks (e.g., close versus ranged), criticals, damage types, evasive action, called shots, severed body parts (based on static hit point target numbers) etc. By way of example, a large pistol does d10 damage, and a knife does d4+Strength (which is oddly higher on average than the magnum); the average agent will have around 35 hit points. Characters are incapacitated at zero hit points, and begin to lose a point of Intelligence every round to represent brain death. Also included in the game system chapter are other nasty world effects (drowning and falling, fire and poison etc), along with brief rules for vehicle maneuvers and operating system-based (rather than social engineering) hacking.

## Setting

Setting information makes up the bulk of the book, starting with the corporations (chapter 6) and the UIG and the Faith (chapter 7). The short background is that corporations grew very large, powerful and monopolistic in the 21st and 22nd century and eventually engaged in a destructive war with each other. From the ruins came the United International Government, as the corporations had exhausted themselves. Other significant changes include the discovery of artificial intelligences on Venus which aided the UIG and have since been released into the world net, and seem to behave quite benevolently.

Each corporation is described in some detail with a basic description, goals, culture, operational method, typical names and ranks, occupations, sub-sects, example characters and unique abilities or equipment. Each corporation has nearly

monopolistic control over a particular area of life; so Ai-Jinn has the mining and macrostructure pretty much under its control, whereas Eurasian has health and leisure. Despite their low rate of pay, it is likely Comoros (telepaths, education and culture) will be a popular support among PCs as they have the most noble goals and history. Overall - and this is high praise - the Corporations summary chapter reminded me somewhat of the classic Cults of Prax, but in a vastly different setting. One may add to this the discussion of the Order of the True Faith, a Buddhist-derived religion based on telepathy, eschewing technology, with the objectives of eliminating poverty, crime, corruption and dehumanisation.

In comparison to the corporations, the UIG remains a Archon (AI) backed, if not controlled, organisation. UIG operatives receive quite an array of specialist equipment and legal protections. Whilst nominally a democracy (citizens do have the right to vote), the UIG also has a policy of 'Depersonalisation', whereby breaching serious laws will cause one to lose citizenship status and become property - open for slavery, organ-harvesting, whatever. Given that the UIG was established and imposed after a destructive corporate global war this policy should be questioned; whilst perhaps thematically appropriate and a handy plot-device, post-war governments tend to be more liberal - indeed, popular opinion is often towards the radical. It is the build up to war where the forces of reaction typically gain ascendancy.

Setting information is supplemented by a world-overview which provides a discussion of typical communication systems, sample mundane goods and services, travel (intercontinental skybridges, teleport stations), foods (vat grown), and sports (including the extremely violent, and downright silly, 'wetball', gladiatorial games and legal duelling), crime and the environment (significantly colder due to the Corporate War, lower biomass). Computers and artificial intelligences receive special mention for the Minerva project, an AI which, in its quest for self-preservation, destroyed most of France. Cities receive their own chapter, especially dedicated to the elite Spire Cities, corporate-gated communities, the shanty-town Underswells, and 'Relic Cities' of the Order, and the wrecks of the Old Cities. A "People and Places" makes up the final setting chapter. This includes a list of the minor corporations in existence, minor regions (such as lawless Australia), off-world entertainment and research centres, academies, the machina cult and the droid liberation army. The latter represents as close at the setting gets to a discussion of politics.

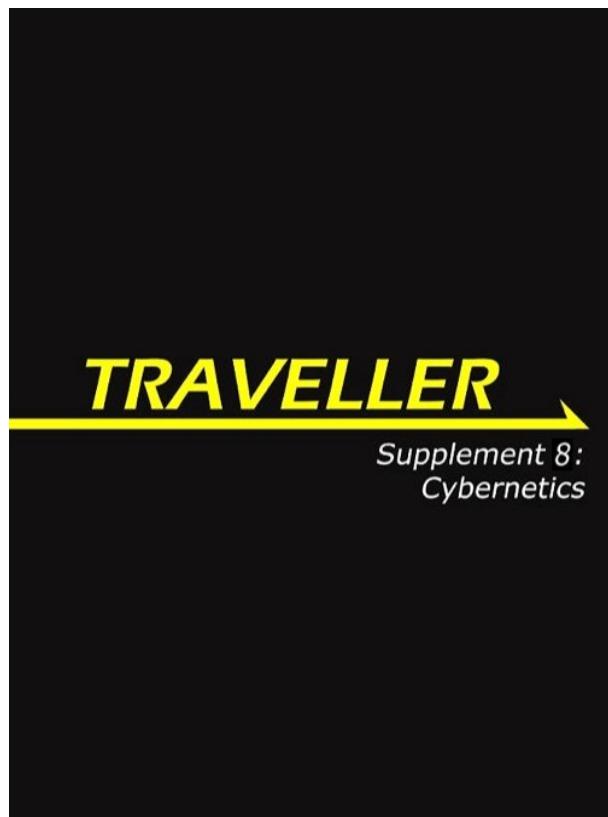
The final two chapters are GM aids. The first of these is for running a game of Corporation, and contains some good advice for running games where the PCs have multiple loyalties, mission and plot development, a collection of 100 mission ideas, five sample mission outlines, and a range of sample installation floorplans. The final chapter, Antagonists, provides as expected a range of sample characters including Mutated Humans, Civilians, Scientist/Doctor, Bounty Hunter, Outlaws, Security Guards, UIG Officer, Devotees of the Order, various Agents and even droids. Each of these is provided in full-page write-ups, sample art, and a alternatives. It rather reminded me of the AD&D 2e Monster Compendium in layout.

## Overall

Corporation is a solid product. It is well made, well presented, and sticks to its theme and setting. There is an excellent density of useful information throughout the book. The game system, whilst not providing anything that is ground-breaking new, is largely consistent and coherent. Setting-wise the overly strong cybernetic rather than biotech orientation, and a rather far-future date of 2500 serve raise some concerns, but these are relatively trivial to a game which shows that cyberpunk, as a gaming genre, still has a lot to offer.

Style: 1 + .6 (layout) + .6 (art) + .7 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .9 (product) = 4.3

Substance: 1 + .8 (content) + .8 (text) + .6 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 4.6



## Traveller Supplement 8: Cybernetics

Traveller Supplement 8: Cybernetics is the newest sourcebook for Mongoose's Traveller line. Cybernetics is a 100 paged soft cover book with a black and white interior. The interior art is good and fits the surrounding information; however, it still follows the usual Traveller style in that there really is not a whole lot of art inside the book. The cover has the usual black background with the Traveller logo which is yellow for this book.

Cybernetics starts out with a section on how to create PCs that have or deal with cybernetics. This is done by having whole new lifepath charts to generate all of the previous careers with more cybernetic leanings. The careers now have a large chance of starting with appropriate cybernetics, and events and mishaps are often involving cybernetics in some form. There are even new charts for PCs to random roll what cybernetics they receive in PC creation. These new career write-ups seem well thought out, and seem to cover a wide range of ideas for creating an interesting character.

Cybernetics has a wonderful chapter covering a lot of the aspects of cybernetics. These range from how they are seen in society, the reasons cybernetics are used, how available they are to the public, and the side-effects one may see from gaining cybernetics. All of the issues are covered for any tech level that may contain cybernetics; which, differing TLs can make a big difference in how cybernetics are perceived or fit into society. There are rules for the amount of time the surgeries take to add cybernetics. Cybernetic surgery often takes weeks to recover from, and could give your PC quite a bit of downtime. A rule that I find particularly nice, is the rule for checking to see if cybernetics are needed after bad trauma cases. If a PC has two of their stats reduced to 0 from damage or more, the pc must roll to see if cybernetics were needed to survive the ordeal. There are also rules for the effects of EMPs and if cybernetics are biotechnological replacements instead of machine.

Now we hit the biggest section of the book. This biggest bulk is the write-ups for all of the cybernetics. I thought Book 9: Robot had a lot of cool gadget write-ups for robotic parts, but Cybernetics I think steals the show. As I read through all the write-ups for arms, locomotion, weapons, eyes, psion enhancers, etc..., I find myself realizing that with this book I could run games set in worlds like Ghost in the Shell, Cyberpunk, and if they ever added a magic system even Rifts. This section really gets my brain going, and before I am even half way through the section, I find myself picking parts to make Batou (GitS) or a fully converted NGR cyborg (Rifts.) The list of options is very exhaustive, and covers virtually everything a player or GM could want in their area of cybernetics.

The next section discusses all things cyberspace. And my mind skips from creating well known cyborgs to realizing Traveller could be used to run such games as Shadowrun or The Matrix. The rules for cyberspace cover all the programs, viruses, protection software, and addictions that one could want for running a setting that has some form of cyberspace. While the rules cover a lot of things, none of it ever feels bogged down or so complex as to make the Traveller rules more difficult than they need be. The cyberspace rules still stick to the base mechanic of 2d6; it's just

that instead of real world application the rolls are towards cyber equivalents. Again Traveller sticks to the idea that GMs can either run cyberspace in a sort cinematic way with programs being represented by real world equivalents, or ran in a technical aspect where everything is explained by how it works in real life with its technology. I have seen both used in wonderful ways in my playing experience, and am glad that Traveller does not choose a one true way.

The book finishes with the usual Patrons section that Traveller often uses. For those who do not know, Patrons are a sort of hook, line, and sinker adventure that uses an NPC description for the GM to use. Not only is there the NPC, but there is a quick adventure idea, and then a chart of 'what could be' answers as to how the information could be used, and which direction the adventure might take the players. I find the Patron adventures to be wonderful. They give the GM a catalyst to get the adventure idea juices flowing, but don't go anywhere near as creating a large railroading pre-made adventure. They provide just enough inspiration to help the GM to come-up with some great game ideas.

Overall I find Traveller Supplement 8: Cybernetics to be an awesome addition to the Traveller line. The amount of cybernetics in the book is truly amazing, and the rules for cyberspace are well thought out. The chapter on society and cybernetic issues is wonderfully written. **Substance** is getting a **5**; you could not ask for more information on Cybernetics. I still wish Traveller will up the amount of art in their books because what is there is good work. However, I understand that Traveller has a certain minimalist vibe to it, and Traveller fans come to expect it, so **Style** will be getting an average **3**.



*(Motivational poster by Axiomatic)*

# THE FUTURE IS NEAR: RPGs AND TOMORROW

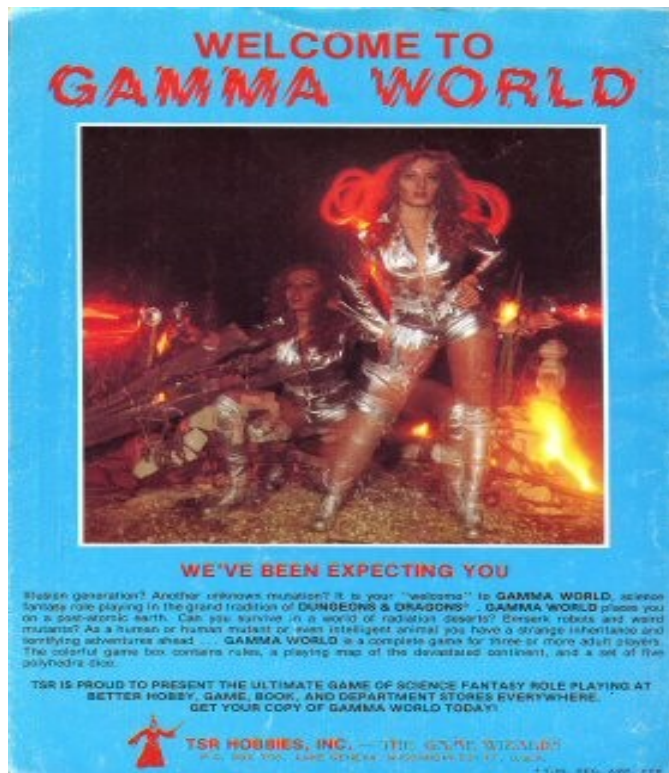
*by Lev Lafayette*

The famous Yugoslav academic of science fiction literature, Darko Suvin, once referred to science fiction as the mythology of modernity framed within a scientific cognitive framework. It is the mythological aspect that is explored here, the idea that 'near future' roleplaying games reflect the hopes, dreams, fears and speculations of the authors, whether consciously or not. The scientific cognitive requirement in this context is less important than what Suvin would desire in defining a science fiction game, requiring a solidly materialist outlook. Some near future stories engage in magical thinking of various kinds, albeit with effects that are subtle or hidden, equating with a contemporary mode of consciousness. Thus a core purpose of this article is to review a number of 'near future' roleplaying games both in terms of literary expressions of their setting and themes whilst engaging in the more explicit question of game design.

## The Wildly Fantastic

There are a number of games which, whilst nominally set in the near future, cannot be classified as 'near future' roleplaying games in the sense of this review. This includes games like Gamma World (1978), Rifts (1990) and Torg

(1990). Their exclusion from a review of "what happens next" is because it the proposed futures are not meant have mythic objective. Neither Gamma World, Rifts or Torg are meant to necessarily propose a future, rather the future is a necessity which the setting requires.



With Gamma World, although the setting is post-nuclear, it is not in the framework of being near future. Although there were thematic attempts in the first edition to treat the post-armageddon circumstances with a modicum of seriousness, the system and content soon led subsequent games towards a science fantasy trajectory with an mostly juvenile amoral theme. 'Mutations' were an opportunity to acquire randomly determined 'super powers', encounters with other sapient beings was highly orientated towards violent conflict. The social organisations most explicitly described in the rules, the Cryptic Alliances, are thoroughly removed from any real political considerations and largely follow pathological single-issue obsessions.

Similar comments can also be made about Rifts, which speculates a cross-over of multiple environments through "rifts" on earth. Also speculating a nuclear war, said conflict opens gateways to fantasy powers (dwarves, dragons etc), horror (vampires, demons), science fiction-derived (cyborgs, aliens) etc. The Megaversal game system, deriving heavily from early AD&D (roll-under percentile skill checks, roll-high d20 combat checks and roll-high d20 saving throws, character classes, experience points), is notable for "Mega-Damage Capacity". The standard



disclaimer at the beginning of Rifts indicates a cognitive dissonance at work; "none of us at Palladium Book condone or encourage the occult, the practise of magic, the use of drugs, or violence" - except that the entire line of play is heavily orientated towards exploring these practises.

At the other end of the continuum is Torg, set with the break-up of earth into different cosms (fantasy, horror, primitive, cybernetic, pulp-era). This does argue that Rifts is a derived from Gamma World's setting and themes, and Torg's setting. The PC protagonists are 'Storm Knights', attempting to protect the prevent the plans of the High Lords who control each cosm. Despite the title of 'Storm Knights' and unlike the previous two games, Torg characters are a very diverse lot as challenges take a much wider variety of expressions, the universal resolution system allows for greater system-integrated activity, and the unique 'drama deck' encourages cinematic narrative input. Furthermore, the setting suggests more sophisticated alliances between the inhabitants of the various regimes and even in-setting explanations for traditionally problematic motifs (such as the traditional fantasy association of beauty equating with goodness).

## Nuclear Armageddon

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the combination of antagonistic and belligerent world-leaders in the form of Ronald Reagan and Leonid Brezhnev and a troubled international arena raised the prospect of nuclear war. There was a significant wave of movies and television postulating such circumstances, such as Threads (UK, 1984) and The Day After (US, 1983), along with the most under-recognised Q.E.D. documentary A Guide To Armageddon (UK, 1982). Roleplaying games also followed this concern with a number postulating life after a nuclear war, most prominent being The Morrow Project (1980), Aftermath! (1981), Twilight 2000 (1984), which was significantly revised to the point of virtually being a new game system (following other games by the same publisher, e.g., MegaTraveller) in the second edition (1990).

Two immediate objections could be raised from this list; the first is exclusion of Paranoia (1984) and the second being the inclusion of Twilight 2000, given that it is well and truly beyond the year 2000 when the game is set. The reason for this is as follows; although Paranoia is set after a nuclear war it is not about survival in a post-holocaust environment, even if it does include a great number of cold war metaphors.

Rather it is more thoroughly discussed in the Police State section below. With regards to Twilight 2000 the date as such is a rather nominal component of the setting, consisting most effectively of two main components; near future and post-nuclear.



The background narrative of The Morrow Project was the cryogenic freezing of teams and equipment to be revived in the event of a 1989 nuclear war to rebuild. Such a war eventuates at the teams (often with psionic characters) awaken far after the allocated time in a hostile environment. The thematic conflict and narrative objective is stated strongly: "Pledged to help humanity recover in whatever way they can, they can easily lose sight of there own ideals and adopt the brutal code of survival. They must find Prime Base in order to survive." As paramilitary groups, huge sections of the game are dedicated to combat equipment and simulation. Realistically, specific U.S. cities are noted for being nuclear targets (including probably bomb type) and 95-99% of radioactive mutations are described as harmful or lethal. Isolated, and often strange, human settlements exist along with normal and, more rarely, mutated fauna; the most fantastic being radioactive

undead.

In a similar manner, *Aftermath!* also expressed itself as a realistic game. Indeed it made a point of describing itself as being for "Role Playing Simulation". No specific background story was proposed, except for a nominal setting "20-30 years after the Ruin" (even if the main scenario packs were set 100 years later). At least a third of the game is dedicated to setting information, searching, hazards, beasts both normal and mutant. This includes the survival necessities of food and water, but also salvaging electricity. Occasionally the seriousness of the game is left behind in favour of popular motifs; psionic powers, mutants humans, ape civilisation (as in "Planet of The"), super-genius giant rats and highly edible giant cockroaches are all examples. There is a heavy emphasis on martial skills and combat resolution, with a notorious 30 area hit location chart and a two-page flowchart for combat.

*Twilight 2000* always took its history background quite seriously. The first edition postulated a conflict between the Warsaw Pact and the People's Republic of China, which took a nuclear turn when West Germany invaded the East, eventually resulting in a nuclear conflict. In the second edition of the game, the history was updated to accommodate the new political circumstances, but the results remain very similar. The game's PC protagonists are, by default, the remains of an isolated military division in an chaotic social environment. Huge sections of the game are, not surprisingly, dedicated to military equipment, however the main conflict that the characters will face are environmental (food and water, radiation, disease) and social (some opposing forces, but mainly "ambitious warlords, local militias and bands of marauding deserters"), rather than classical military conflicts. This was particularly emphasised in the second edition, along with the hanging narrative - a theme on its own - "Good luck. You're on your own".

The common features of each of these games is a strong emphasis on realism, far more than is average for most roleplaying games. Each of the authors wanted to express a scientific approach to the problem of a post-nuclear age in a manner that was expressing a possible future. Each also expressed a military or paramilitary approach to survival in such harsh conditions. With the breakdown of the State, the theme of people being unable to govern or organise themselves on the same scale is assumed, even if this was not intended by the authors. Of the three examples the one that is the most complete and playable as a game system and offers the best thematic challenges is the second edition of *Twilight 2000*, even though the narrative objective is most clearly stated in *The Morrow Project*.

### **The Police State**

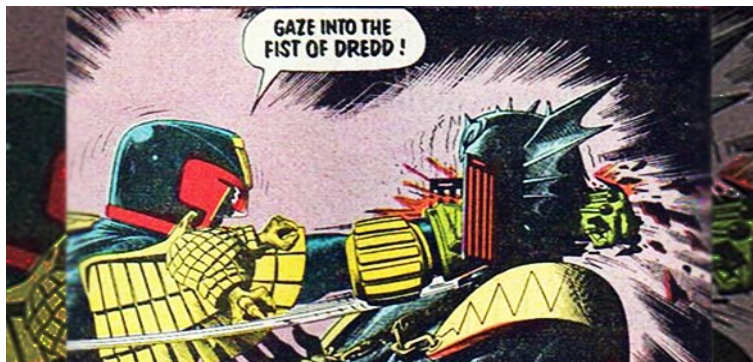
Despite roleplaying games being at their heyday when the famous George Orwell novel reached its titled zenith, the police-state has not been a strong setting in roleplaying games. This is somewhat mystifying as the opportunity for a small-band of freedom fighters against a totalitarian state is surely a golden opportunity for the combination of cinematic heroism, gritty realism and the narrative prospect of the most criminal betrayal. It is perhaps because of the overwhelming dominance of one game in these theme, *Paranoia* (1984), although one can certainly see the thematic considerations in *The Price of Freedom* (1986) and *Judge Dredd: The Roleplaying Game* (1989). What is notable in these three games is an emphasis on satire. With the exception of playing the more recent "straight" *Paranoia* (that is the style, as opposed to "classic" or "zap"), none of the games seem to take the historical prospect or narrative opportunity of totalitarianism seriously.

Despite being set after WWII *Paranoia* is not about such a war, or the narrative tropes that arise from such a conflict. Rather, as the game describes itself; "Imagine a world designed by Kafka, Stalin, Orwell, Huxley, Sartre and the Marx Brothers... *Catch-22* meets 1984!". A totalitarian state, nominally run by The Computer, is built on doublethink and hysteria; 'Chutzpah' is a key characteristic, an important skills include 'Spurious Logic' and 'Bootlicking'. The protagonists are trouble-shooters, assigned by The Computer to find traitors, mutants and secret society members - except the player characters, individually, are traitors, mutants, and secret society members. In recent editions the game has become more aware of the thematic conflicts between the slapstick and the macabre and allowed for playing styles to diverge, although for the latter style the problematic aspect of clones being readily available conflicts an in-game necessity (because *Paranoia* is so violent) with the setting; a clone of troubleshooter executed for treason will also be treasonous. Resolving this in a manner that makes narrative sense is an opportunity and challenge both for current

individual GMs but also for designers of future editions.

Also treading the border between the deadly serious and the satirical is *The Price of Freedom*. In this setting, explicitly following movies like *Red Dawn*, a deliberately over-the-top totalitarian and humourless version of the Warsaw Pact and its allies manage to occupy the United States (think Stalin rather than Gorbachev). The tone is described as "grim patriotism", with cathartic "opportunities for mayhem". Substantial theoretical and practical emphasis is placed on waging guerrilla warfare with the importance of trust and support of the local populations and the strategic importance of engaging in the diverse low-intensity tactics, complete with appropriate quotations from Mao Zedong and Che Guevara. Notably the game has a very complex and technical combat system and states that it is as much a wargame (on a squad level scale) as a roleplaying game. It is worth pointing out here that *The Price of Freedom* is written by Greg Costikyan, a senior developer for *Paranoia*, with stated assistance from Ken Rolston, who was also a developer for *Paranoia*. Both were originally published by West End Games. Costikyan also mentions the significant influence of Frank Chadwick, designer of *Twilight 2000*.

The last game in this set is *Judge Dredd*, which is rules light (8 attribute/skills, plus abilities) with characters very much being dependent on their equipment. As can be imagined much of the story is dedicated to being on patrol and making arrests and there is some discussion of the legal mores required along with the harsh penalties in Mega-City One (three months for an overdue video, one hundred days to two years for jaywalking). As with *Paranoia*, *Judge Dredd* is set in a post-war environment, but the war is background, not central to the setting. The setting is primarily the Mega-City, the entire eastern seaboard of the United States, which is a nominal capitalist democracy of significant leisure (87% unemployment), and fair resources. Sapient apes and aliens are also a feature of the City. A great deal of attention and detail is dedicated to the setting, characters from the comic series etc, but there is very little on emphasising the satirical themes.



### **Alien Contact**

Surprisingly, alien contact is not a significant theme in near future science fiction roleplaying games, despite a rather strong association in literature and film (e.g., *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Alien* and its sequels (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997), *Predator* (1987), *Men in Black* (1997)), although such sf is often associated with contemporary times rather than the near future. It is possible to suggest that, applying for a lower common denominator, the combination of the challenges of new technologies <I>and</I> alien contact is too much for a mass market. Nevertheless in the roleplaying field one can suggest games like *Fringeworthy* (1982), *Traveller 2300/2300AD* (1986), *Aliens* (1990), *Eclipse Phase* (2009) as examples.

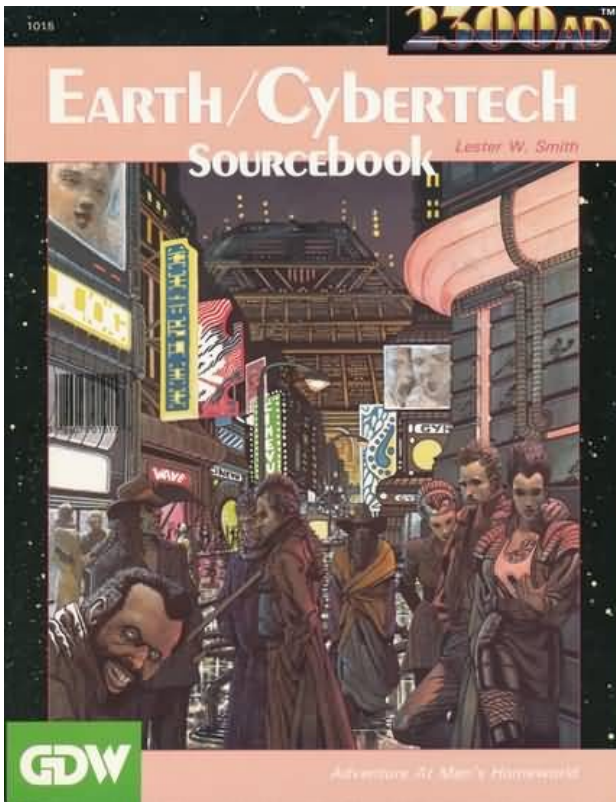
In *Fringeworthy*, a small number of people (including the PCs, obviously) are able to step through gates into alternative earth histories and alien worlds. Left behind by a now deceased benevolent dog-like species called the Tehrmelern, these gateways unfortunately have another visitor; the Mellor, a malevolent and very hungry species who engage in

multiple life stages, shapeshifting, and memory absorption, making them extremely dangerous foes. As the Mellor advance in stages they become more intelligent and are require less messy means for memory acquisition. Of course, the Fringeworthy are not even aware of this existence of the Mellor - at first.

Continuing the theme of the only good alien is a dead alien Traveller 2300/2300 AD provided the Kafer. Derived from the German phrase for "beetle" it had the unfortunate connotation at the time to refer to black South Africans ("kaffir") by the more racist sections of the white community. Making disparaging comments about "kafers" in the late 1980s, the twilight of apartheid, could cause some social embarrassment when misconstrued when overheard by those unfamiliar with the context. To be sure, there will be those who rush to Traveller 2300/2300 AD's defence - after all, they were not the only life form. There was the cute and friendly the Sung, the helpful Pentapods, the primitive Xiang and so forth. But realistically, the chief setting in Traveller 2300/2300 AD is the conflict between the various branches of human civilisation and the Kafer.

It is hardly worth elaborating in great detail how the Aliens RPG, obviously, also follows this theme. Of course the ante is increased somewhat because the aliens in question are more than a match on a one-to-one basis with any human. So in this context aliens aren't just the enemy they are a very powerful and dangerous enemy. However, through technology and social organisation we might just stand a chance.

Eclipse Phase is interesting in this consideration as both artelect artificial intelligences (TITANs) and aliens both take the role of antagonists to humanity, or rather the transformed humanity. The TITANs were artificial intelligences that decided to turn on their transhuman creators by causing international wars with devastating results. Forcing and collecting uploaded human minds, the TITANs suddenly vanish from the solar system. Later wormholes, left by the TITANs are discovered. Entry into these areas result in the encounter of an alien species who warn humanity to turn back and never again create self-improving AIs.



### Cyberpunk

The conventions of the cyberpunk literary and subcultural genre are well known, expressed in films like Blade Runner (1982), the Matrix trilogy (1999-2003), and novels like William Gibson's Neuromancer (1984), Bruce Sterling's Schismatrix (1985), and Neal Stephanson's Snow Crash (1992). This issue of RPG Review already contained detailed reviews of the major cyberpunk games; Cyberpunk 2013/2020 (1988, 1990), Cyberspace (1989), Shadowrun (1989), GURPS Cyberpunk (1990) - the latter aided by Ultra-Tech (1989). We can also add to this list supplements such a Earth/Cybertech for Traveller 2300AD (1989), Cyber Hero (1992) to new games such as OGL Cybernet (2003) and Corporation (2006). In each of these games, true to the genre, the key setting-based thematic considerations are cybernetics, cyberspace and societal and environmental decay.

In this area various bionic parts were considered the most important form of the technological transformation of the species. Biological and transgenic changes would mostly come later. In all the



games (except GURPS Cyberpunk) there was system integration of the issue of artificial components into the body corpus through the gradual loss of empathy leading to psychopathological behaviour. GURPS, ever realistic, did not entertain such possibilities, although an arguable trajectory not considered by was that the behavioural changes were sociopathological rather than psychopathological. Especially if they were the result of workplace or military requirements, rather than being introduced for health or by free choice.

The concept of an international global communications network may seem mundane to us now, but back in the late 1980s the concept was certainly relatively unknown, except for those who participated in various international BBS systems or were fortunate enough to be associated through an APRAnet-connected system. The rise of the GUI within such a international system was certainly science fiction. A universal feature in all cyberpunk games was the use of a cyberspace environment derived from Gibson, an icon-driven, three-dimensional, an immersive universe of Platonic cleanliness which juxtaposed harshly with the external environment. Again, only GURPS diverged from this model allowing individual GMs to use "realistic" operating system interaction with the network. At the other end of the scale Cyberpunk 2013/2020 managed to develop computer networks that were more like a D&D dungeon crawl. Shadowrun deserves special mention for making the network entirely wireless and ubiquitous by 2070 in their fourth edition (2005).

The final component was a collapse of the social mores of the late twentieth century. Across all games there is an assumption that democratic nation-states have lost significant power to multinational corporations. In Cyberpunk 2013/202 and Shadowrun, for example, this was coupled by landmark legal cases which gave corporations the right to control their own military forces. Whilst rarely stated explicitly (except to a degree in GURPS Cyberpunk) such changes alter political economy, leading to a greater division of wealth, the strengthening of corporate monopolistic behaviour, and a disregard for negative externalities such as pollution.

### Transhumanism

It is a relatively smooth transition from the Cyberpunk dystopias to the self-transformation of the human species in the transhuman predictions in roleplaying games, more directly derived from science and academia rather than from literature. GURPS is again a particular leader in this field positing an optimistic forward trajectory in history albeit with outstanding changes to humanity. GURPS Bio-tech (1997) and Transhuman Space (2002) are clear leaders in this predictive genre. Transhuman Space in particular discusses the development of divergent life forms, such as genetically enhanced animals (GURPS Uplift was first published in 1992) and parahumans, with perhaps more attention to artificial intelligences than was even discussed in the various cyberpunk RPGs. The themes in transhuman face are orientated towards the challenges of space colonisation, speciesism and, most interestingly, the rise of "information socialism". Notably, there is no "cyberspace" version of the network.

In a similar trajectory, with an equal attempt for the realistic, Eclipse Phase (2009) posits a transhuman (cybernetic and genetic engineered) future that colonises most of the solar system. The title of a game refers to the period when a cell is infected but





does appear as such, and the game claims, as a thematic consideration that transhumanism is a type of post-apocalyptic event, that there is conspiracy around the providers of transhumanist technology to shape humanity's future, and that the technological transformation of the species engenders horror. As previously mentioned, the TITANS take the role as malicious artifacts.

Less realistically, SLA Industries (1993), whilst the first cyberpunk-like game to concentrate on genetic engineering and biological enhancements, posits an interstellar society hundreds of years in the future where one company (SLA Industries) controls most of the economic transactions in populated space, and PCs carry out the less tasteful tasks of the company, on contract. An amazingly naive and uncaring population is happy to slurp up the entertainment offered by SLA Industry-controlled media and ignore its shocking history and dubious past. As far as an elaboration goes, it is clearly on the extreme side. Most importantly for the transhumanist subgenre, SLA Industries provided much of the development for biogenetics for military purposes.

Underground (1993) also falls under the category of transhuman. Through the discovery of an alien pod, a genetic engineering arms race results with resultant "hot wars" where the supersoldiers are put to test. In a similar manner to the loss of human empathy due to cybernetics, the biotechnology derived superpowers are prone to causing various pathologies, for example, paranoia from the Danger Sense power, multiple personality disorder from Emotion Control. It is particularly surprising that such supersoldiers are let back into civilian life at all; some \$20 million (yes, you read that right), is dedicated by each player for their character's recruitment, reconditioning and genetic modifications.

As a game which manages to cross the cyberpunk and transhuman categories is Shadowrun in its own unique combination of cyberpunk and the 'reawakening' of magic. With the appearance of "metahumans" (Elves, Dwarves, Orks, Trolls) among human populations, these new creatures are a type of transhuman in their own right. Significant complaint can be raised by the attempt to combine Tolkien and Gibson (indeed William Gibson did level such complaint), and the cultural impoverishment in deriving metahumans entirely from North European mythology in the core rules. Regrettably, even given that the designers took the easy option, there is very little that emphasises the metahuman as a thematic consideration in Shadowrun.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This has been a thematic review, rather than a system review, of various near-future science fiction RPGs. There are, of course, a great number of game systems and settings which have neglected in this review, however with comments directed to around twenty or so systems this is nevertheless sufficient to derive some conclusions. Before that however, mentioned must be made of a neglect in this article, and that is, of hypothesised supernatural near-futures, which could include supplements like GURPS Cthulhupunk (1995), although this is a subgenre which seem to have greater association with the 'modern', rather than the 'near-future' (e.g., Heaven and Earth (1998)). It is a crying shame, for example, that the Heresy: Kingdom Come (1996) cardgame - a sort of In Nomine meets Cyberpunk - was never released as an RPG as planned.

What can be derived from this thematic review from near-future RPGs does not speak particularly highly of the genre. The first is that the industry slavishly follows what is popular. Whilst of course they are interested in profit, the attachment to the genres is not a critical one which break genre conventions whilst retaining the setting. Often that is left up to the players of such games themselves, which one can suppose is an advantage of the hobby. So survival in a post-apocalypse event depends on military and survivalist skills, and alien encounters will inevitably result in warfare. Even in the cyberpunk/transhumanist games attempts to uncover the causes of environmental and social breakdown within the context of political economy are totally absent. Whether or not future roleplaying games take up these challenges obviously is yet to be seen; the prognosis however is not promising.

# GURPS KRONONAUTS: WORLDBOOK 2090

*by Karl Brown et. al.*

The following is a future setting for 2090 adaptable for various near-future games and is currently used in a GURPS Krononauts (time-travellers) campaign. Although there are many and varied timelines like the following that are available in the commercial world, this one has been subject to particular scrutiny by scientists, technologists and sociologists. As such the projections are considered to have a stronger sense of probability than many of those available in commercial products whose prime purpose often seems to be to satisfy the futuristic game setting.

## **Home Time**

The campaign starts in the year 2092CE. Krononauts use the term 'Hometime' to refer to their present and by extension the Earth and Inhabited Solar System of 2092. 'Hometime' adventures can supplement those set in the past. Hometime is also the background from which most PCs come from. This campaign 'world' includes Earth and near solar system. There are independent lunar colonies, Mars has numerous scientific facilities, and the asteroid belt is the home of diverse mining "Belters". The setting incorporates much imagined in the cyberpunk genre but without the bleak world view of the cyberpunks, a wealthier world economy, and a greater presence of biotech. The history to 2092CE is assumed to be a likely extension of current trends without apocalyptic disasters of any kind, just the usual amount of bad times expected of any period of history.

This first section deals with some details of the 'Hometime' background.

The fantastic aspects of the setting, time travel and psionics, are carefully described in such a way as to limit their influence. In this way a plausible background for this future world was maintained.

## **Campaign Type**

The PCs are krononauts and rebels, time travellers who have stolen time travel technology from a powerful corporation's secret project. The company, Stuttgart Meyer GMBH, seeks to alter history for profit. The PCs believe this provides the corporation with too much power or could have dangerous unforeseen effects. The rebels therefore seek to block the corporation's efforts. The existence of time travel is known only to krononauts. Both the corporation and the rebels fear what the powerful governments would do if the secret got out. Therefore missions proceed under a cloak of subterfuge.

Within the framework outlined above the krononauts can participate in a various adventure types. PCs should be tough, and adaptable. The group must contain individuals with a great variety of skills or complementary specialists. Missions could include exploration and investigation of the past, using time travel to glean profit to fund their group, participation in battles to prevent enemy agents changing the outcome, and other actions to prevent changes to history. The need for secrecy produces circumstances something like an espionage campaign. This is especially true during 'Hometime' missions.

## **Government**

The UN has not emerged as a world government and the corporations have not taken over; the most powerful organisations in the world remain the nation states.

This section and the corresponding portions of the future history were conceived in the most collaborative fashion. A great deal of discussion was generated on the groups email list regarding these topics and careful consultation with the group members undertaken before the final draft. This procedure has produced a richer world than any one of use could

of created alone.

## **Nations**

Most nations would be familiar to a 20th century reader but there are some new developments:

- The EU has become a true unified nation, the USE, reaching from the British Isles to the Balkans.
- In central America UCAS is a similar super-state. Malaysia and Indonesia have unified into the Malay Republic.
- New Zealand is unified into the Australian Federation as two states (North and South Islands, Stewart Island is part of the Southern state) forming the nation of Australasia.
- The USA has lost states during a difficult century for the former super-power.
- Tibet finally gained independence in 2059.
- Israel has lost its nation-state status. The regions is claimed by the new Palestinian Confederation (former Jordan and Palestine).
- Iraq has broken up, forming the new nation of Kurdistan, which also claims a portion of eastern Turkey. A thin region of eastern Iraq is claimed by Iran and the remaining central region remains Iraq.
- The artificial country of Afghanistan breaks up, with the southern and eastern sections eventually joining Pakistan, sections of the north joining Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and the remaining regions of Afghanistan (mainly an east Persian people) eventually federating with Iran.
- Canadian province of Nunavut has left and joined Greenland.
- In Africa national borders are slowly being redrawn to align with pre-colonial cultures.

International relations have been transformed this century. The USA, Japan, Australasia, and a liberalised China form the Pacific Alliance. A Middle-East Confederation of modernised states has brought peace and increased influence to that once troubled region. The UN imposes many restrictions on nations in the arenas of human rights, trade, and war crimes. The UN has control of the World Bank, GATT/WTO and WIPO, and ICAAN. There are UN space and naval forces but these are pitifully small, designed to transport troops and provide logistics. Of note though is the ICC Commandoes, an elite force sent to bring major war criminals to justice. The UN has also absorbed Interpol, as well as facilitating cooperation between national police forces these police have jurisdiction in international waters, Antarctica, and space. Antarctica is controlled by UNESCO.

### **Africa, hope and inequality**

Infectious cures for malaria and trypanosomes and similar medical advances result in the continent developing a population boom and thus a huge poor workforce. Africa undergoes an economic transformation reminiscent of China in the 1990's. Most Africans remain poor, more and more work long hours in hazardous polluting factories for a pittance but an elite few become amazingly rich off the labours of the others.

### **Europe, old adversaries united**

The United States of Europe (USE) is technically a close Federation of states much as the USA is. The old nations of Europe still have great control over national matters. The police, military, and criminal justice system are however unified across Europe as is the currency. Member states now include Turkey, Morocco, Iceland, Switzerland and Norway. Within the USE states tend to vote in blocks, for example the Celtic alliance of Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and Brittany. Non-humans can hold USE citizenship but with the limitation that they are barred from immigration into some more conservative member states.

### **Russia, Shadows of Glory**

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the massive land based empire of the 20th century, Russia has had a troubled history. In the political and economic chaos that followed the fall of Soviet communism a number of provinces struggled for independence and many won free. Those that did not required sporadic military action to quell unrest. The most notable

of these was the Ukraine stand-off of 2028. With ex-soviet provinces being absorbed into Europe or falling into lawlessness, Russia has become increasingly isolated. Russia is falling apart and has no powerful allies to give her a hand up.

Along with the arctic war internal conflicts have led to a large amount of aging military hardware on Russian streets, particularly in frontier regions. Often these weapons are in the hands of would be rebels or criminals. The Russian police forces are ill-equipped to deal with the threat of criminals armed with (antique) military hardware. Sending in the army is rarely an option because of troubled international relations.

The long hard years of communism followed by the power vacuum of the early 21st century enabled organised crime to get an iron grip in Russia and many former soviet states that now have independence. While elsewhere in the world organised crime is loosing the fight against government surveillance in Russia it flourishes and corrupts. Here the world-wide trend of ever decreasing crime levels has been bucked.

For rebel time travellers the loose control of the Russian government and susceptibility of police and officials to corruption could help hide desperate rebels. Organised crime and weapon availability will enable those willing to deal with the dark side to gain weapons that simply cannot be had elsewhere in the tightly controlled nations of the world. Finally, for those who want their future world to be less pleasant the Russian underground provides a back-drop for grim 'cyberpunk' style adventures, quite unlike the safe, civilised, vision of the future that blankets most of the world. It should be easy to re-badge many old scenarios for cyberpunk genre games and move them into Russia, Kazakstan and other ex-soviet nations

### **Middle East, troubled peace**

In the 2030's the face of the Middle East changed. Much of the dismantling of the Israeli state was orchestrated by Rabbi David Ben Levi, a sort of Mandela figure, who's efforts form the Palestinian Confederation between Israel, Palestine and Jordan through negotiation. The rabbi was an ultra-orthodox Jew, one of those that is so orthodox that they actually disagree with political Zionism in favour of a spiritual version thereof.

Other key influences in the Middle East include the Iranian liberal tradition 'Mossedeq', from this and other sources sprung a cultural revolution. Only Saudi Arabia remains conservative. This transformation is a cause of great upheaval during this decade there were radical zealots who will denounce the old school as traitors to the religion just as much as there was moderates reaching out to liberal democracy. Iran emerges from this period a shining liberalised light and uses this political momentum to attract new territory. Similarly, this upheaval saw the formation of the Kurdish nation and loss of territory for Iraq.

### **UCAS, a new American Union**

The United Central American States includes the states of Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, West Indies, and Panama. The new super-state takes a 'Costa Rican' approach to military issues.

### **USA, the lost dream**

Texas, Southern California and the southern half of Arizona and New Mexico have seceded. The eleven year Mexican War in the 2030's drained the economy and will of the Union and tied up the military might of the nation, the only real advantage the USA still held over the emerging powerhouses of Europe, India, and China.

After an extended period of hyper-libertarianism and hyper-capitalism then two years of infighting in government, a highly conservative and pro-regulatory government was voted in 2044. Voters and the culture at large reacted to the failures of the previous libertarian government. Since that time there has been a constant political struggle as the government tries to rein in the huge corporations spawned in the first four decades of the century without causing

disastrous economic upheaval.

While Russia and ex-soviet states are the place for 'street-level' cyberpunk style games the USA is the place to play out the other cyberpunk idea of corporate power and corruption.

### **Organisations**

Organisations provide background, opponents, encounters, and allies for PCs. PCs must also endeavour to keep the secret of time travel from these powerful groups.

### **Corporations**

Only in the USA is there a power struggle between the government and the corporations. Corporation grew powerful in the USA in previous decades of hyper-capitalism. Elsewhere the corporation must tread carefully for fear of government reprisals. However, even in the USA the government is far more powerful than any single corporation. One large corporation has a distinct secret advantage, the ability to time travel (Meyer Stuttgart GMBH).



### **Criminal Organisations**

The sophistication of the surveillance technologies available to the Law has driven many criminal organisations to extinction. Those that remain are highly sophisticated multinational crime syndicates operating not only on Earth but also throughout the settled inner solar system. Criminal organisations make good opponents for PCs. They are also another group of organisations who must never be allowed to discover the existence of time travel. However, many dangerous goods and suspect services needed by a secretive rebel group might only be available through illegal channels.



### **International Criminal Court**

The ICC trials those accused of crimes against humanity including human rights abuses, war crimes, and unauthorised weapons of mass destruction. Should the UN become aware of time travel possession of an unauthorised time machine would likely be a crime judged at this level. The ICC maintains its own small force of elite commandoes charged with bringing breakers of international law to trial.

### **Intelligence Agencies**

Espionage is very common. Nations and corporations maintain intelligence agencies. The UN is also rumoured to have spies to supply information to the Peacekeepers and Inspection Service. Any of these agencies could be wily opponents should the Krononauts raise suspicion. Krononauts are also likely to be mistaken for foreign spies in many historical eras.

### **United Nations Inspection Service**

The inspection service is empowered to search for weapons of mass destruction and human rights abuses on Earth and beyond. Should the nations become aware of time travel technology the Inspection Service would likely be assigned to finding unauthorised time machines.

### **Peacekeepers**

The UN Peace Keepers now have their own small dedicated naval and space forces both designed to transport troops and supply logistics. The Peacekeepers are often assigned to disperse tensions between the many small national space colonies and facilities within the solar system. They also act as a space rescue service and police unauthorised expansions of national facilities on other worlds. Krononauts on missions to troubled regions in the near-past and present are likely to encounter Peacekeepers.

### **Research Institutes and Universities**

The world has numerous research institutes and universities. These can be supported by philanthropic foundations, government grants, or corporations. Many experts with knowledge useful in past eras could be recruited from these institutes.

### **Space Agencies**

Most nations in the late 21st century have active well funded space agencies. These bodies further the nations goals within the developing inner solar system and in richer nations are charged with exploring beyond the frontier in the outer solar system. Space agency activities include exploration, planetary survey, para-military actions, scientific investigation, and building national space infrastructure. Any mission beyond the Earth's atmosphere will encounter one or more space agencies.

### **World Trade Organisation**

The WTO plays an important role in regulating the world economy and ensuring that the nations abide by UN trade agreements.

# THE MELBAPLEX PBeM

by *Brendan Evans*

An *Introduction to the* MelbaPlex: Mostly From RPG Review Issue #3

The Melbaplex is post-war Melbourne, Australia. For GameMasters, get yourself a map of Melbourne. Cut out all the parts in between suburban railway nodes. The central city and the suburban railway nodes are covered in big protective bubbles, linked together by the wonderful mag-lev transport network. Sometimes these mag-levs are late and The Computer apologises for any inconvenience. But nobody complains. Nobody alive, anyway. Anything outside the bubble is *Outside*, which doesn't exist and if it did it would be radioactive anyway. Often the mag-levs are operated by former Vulture Trooper craft pilots. Sometimes they have flashbacks.

Life in the Melbaplex really depends on your status. Manual and clerical work is carried out by Infrared and Red status citizens. Some red status citizens make it the giddy heights of being a Troubleshooter. Chances are however, they'll remain in Manual or Clerical. Yellow status citizens are usually assigned Clerical Management roles. Those who take the Troubleshooter path will have to work their way up to Blue before they join the Blues (equivalent of Vulture Troopers). Indigo, Violet and Ultraviolet characters are high programmers.

A typical day in Melbaplex for a typical citizen consists of gloriously trying to get to work by 9am to serve the computer, explaining to Yellow class citizens why they are late, whilst not complaining about the mag-lev service and trying to follow the orders of The Computer during the day, which provides cheerful periods of utterly boring and repetitive tasks, following by an opportunity of mad panic when it provides short-term tasks which are seem to the poor citizen to be insane and dangerous. At home, the typical citizen watches a lot of soporific television which makes the pain of the day go away.



## Summary

This adventure was written for use as a PBEM but it should suit tabletop or freeform without too many modifications. It has many characters, allows room for guest stars and extra players. Typical appropriate secret society memberships include Computer Phreaks, Humanists, Illuminati, Mystics, Sierra Club etc.

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After many restless nights and overworked days a team of loyal drones who are promoted to Red and reassigned as Trouble Shooters to capture an Infrared who The Computer has decided needs to be captured. During and after the attempted capture, the characters begin to get confused over whether they are dreaming, or living, or dreaming that they're living, or just crazy and maybe a tad paranoid.

### **What is Really Going On (Law, Blue Pill)**

The Computer has been having some problems with a new secret society that thinks that "Melbacomplex reality" is in fact a dream and not reality. The secret society thinks that they must destroy The Computer to enable everyone to wake up to the "real world".

This is causing The Computer some problems, none the least of which It thinks it IS the "Real World". The Secret Society seems to attract computer hackers and programmers.

The Trouble Shooters are used first in an attempt to capture a Infrared drone, who for some reason can out gun, out run, out think, and out shoot everyone who goes after her, all at the same time. The clone seem to (ie - she runs into) trap her in a Confessional-Booth but she escapes into thin air. The clones are demoted to drones again and sent back to the workforce. Then they are promoted again, and used as security during an attempt to capture a Infrared level clerical (Player Character) worker. This succeeds.

After a R&D (Player Character) boffin inserts a device into the Infrared (Player Character) s/he is released in an attempt to track his movements. He is debugged and the troubleshooters are demoted. When back at work someone who wants to give up the others contacts them but the players will have to find a specific high level individual, who will quickly promote them up the ladder again. They set up the meeting and capture one of the head hackers. Great joy through the land. During interrogation they get raided and the hostage escapes. But then through sheer luck and special new skills they get to fight it out with the new uberhacker and possibly save the complex from destruction.

You are probably not terribly surprised to discover that the plot line has a remarkable similarity to *The Matrix*. It is highly recommended, indeed essential, the GMs watch the film and take notes in accordance in the plot line below.

### **What's Really Going On (Chaos, Red Pill)**

The Computer has been having some problems with a new secret society that seems to think that reality is a dream, and that they must destroy The Computer to enable everyone to wake up to the real world. Depending on how the characters roleplay, this may or may not be true. If it is true they discover that Bots have taken over the world and they use clones as batteries. The secret society has lots of hackers working for it so they can cause a lot of trouble for the Bots.

Anyway, the characters have to make contact with the society, convince them to let the characters join, help an oracle, rescue someone, fall in love, kick ass, and live happily ever after dodging big angry transbots and eating gruel.

### **Adventure Timetable**

Real Life	Day cycle	Who	Details
1	10	All	Go to work and try not to get killed.
2	11	All	Go to work and try not to get killed. Nightmares start. From this day the

			nightmares never go away unless specified.
3	12	All	Go to work and try not to get killed
4	13	All	Go to work and try not to get killed
5	14a	All	Free day - go to markets. Right words will reveal existence of the Society.
6	14p	All	Secret Society makes contact. Offers the Red Pill or Blue Pill option. If Red Pill taken follow Chaos plotline, if Blue Pill taken follow Law plotline.
7	1a	All	Late to work; disaster with mag-lev operator who is having flashbacks. Bad start. Promoted to Troubleshooters. Sent to capture Infrared.
8	1p	All	Fail. Die probably. Demoted. Sent back to work to try and not get killed.
9	2	All	Go to work and try not to get killed
10	3a	Law	Promoted at work mid morning shift. Briefed. Equipped. Lectured.
11	3a	Chaos	Late to work. Then package delivered. Cops.
	3p	Law	Sent to capture Infrared. Deliver prisoner.
12	3p	Chaos	Arrested at work.
13	4a	Law	High ranking agent thanks. They watch bug device, don't sleep.
13	4a	Chaos	Interrogated. Bugged.
14	4p	Law	Lose bugged clone. Demoted. Sent back to work to try and not get killed.
14	4p	Chaos	Debugged. Meeting
15	5	Law	Work
15	5	Chaos	Reborn.
16	6a	Law	Go to work and try not to get killed
	6a	Chaos	Recover
17	6p	Law	Go to work and try not to get killed. Contacted by one who wants to give the others away. Contact superior.
17	6p	Chaos	Recover
18	7a	Law	Find Meeting at lunch. Negotiate.
18	7a	Chaos	Train
19	7p	Law	Setup trap. Wait.
19	7p	Chaos	Go to Oracle, not the many, Ambushed. Pilot captured.
20	8a	Law	Combat. Capture Pilot
20	8a	Chaos	Combat. Avoid Capture. Retreat
21	8b	Law	Promoted. Taught some secrets. Trained up
21	8b	Chaos	Lick wounds. Heal. Train. Arm up.
22	9a	Law	Interrogate Morpheus. Combat
22	9a	Chaos	Combat. Rescue Pilot.
23	9b	Law	Lose prisoner. Found again. Final Combat
23	9b	Chaos	Escape found again. Final Combat

### ***Conducting the PBEM***

Real Time	Game Time (will be detailed in each post).
Monday Night	GM emails Monday Night with Events and descriptions
Tuesday to Friday	Users email to GM
Saturday	Day Off
Monday Night	GM mails results and next turn.
Tuesday to Friday	Repeat

Do not post publicly until directed by GM to do so. You will get an extra email if you are to post in public. In general play, most posts will be sent to Brendan who will then determine what happens in that time frame whilst taking into consideration your post. The GM will make his new post on Monday night, and then may or may not make the players post public. All secret messages will be kept secret unless circumstances dictate that they should be public (ie - someone overhears you making a private confession).

Player posts must be made by Friday 23:59. If public posts are being used, all text shall be considered IN GAME unless you specifically mention and make it clear to all viewing that it is OUT OF GAME. The GM is final judge, jury and executioner. Don't post. Use email when in doubt. There should be little need for posting, except for your actions. The sooner after Tuesday 00:00 you post, the more likely it is that you will 'get your way' before others. Posting last thing Friday evening means that it is likely you will 'have your turn' last.

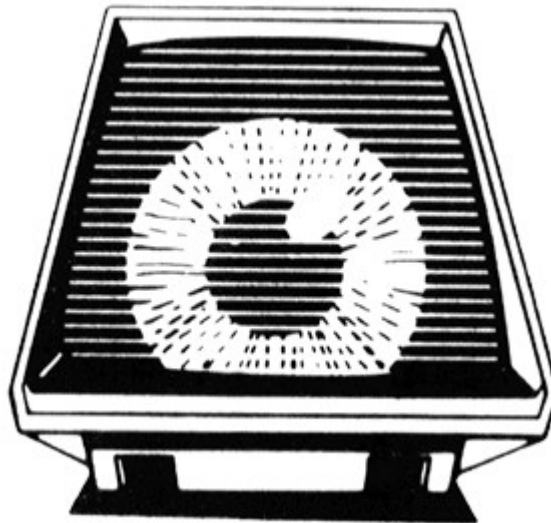
Fail to post and the GM or a "Special Guest Star" will play your character. At any given time, other characters may be Brendan or another player or a guest star. Do not assume they are NPC's and do not assume they are PLAYERS.

Discussion of the game in the real world is permitted, however any signs of collusions or cheating between characters in game will be dealt with very messily and quickly. Remember it should be what your clone knows, not what you know. The only exceptions will be if the characters can show Brendan how they secretly communicated.

The only approved way of sending secret messages between characters is if Brendan is included on CC. Each and every message has to include the CC. Turns will happen in approximate order of posting, unless the Computer or reality prevents it.

Try to keep emails in character. Remember posts are IN GAME. You will get further if you try to play your character like a character. Remember their motivations and background knowledge. It could be useful later on. Nothing is there without a reason (though that reason may be to deceive you).

Generally 1 week Real Time (RT) will equal 1 day Game Time (GT). As the game progresses 1 week RT will change to 12 hours GT, and then possibly 1 week RT to 6hrs GT.



*Are you going to take the Red Pill or the Blue Pill, Citizen? Taking the wrong pill is Treason. Refusing to take a pill is Treason. Which one is the "wrong pill"? That is above your security clearance, Citizen.*



# KOKO: A TECH-RAT

by Erica Hoehn

Koko, her real name so unused it has even been almost forgotten by her, is an Australian of aboriginal heritage in a cyberpunk environment of an unspecified date (the game systems that follow range anywhere from 2020 to 2300). Raised in impoverished circumstances in the sprawl of outer south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Whilst her father worked as a mechanic, her mother in a technical workshop, she had only minimal interaction with either of them. Her two younger brothers were consistently in trouble with school, and then with the police, whilst her older sister was a *prima donna*, addicted to soaps and dreamed of becoming an entertainment star. Whilst Koko probably took up the greatest interest in her parents occupations, their attention was more directed towards fawning over her older sister's dreams or trying to keep her younger brothers under control. In many respects Koko became sullen and resentful, and withdrew into a world of machines, electronics and eventually computers; there, everything made much more sense. This remains a defining feature of her life - machines and computers were logical and not prone to exaggeration or irrationality.

Despite good grades in high school, she chose not to continue on to university and left an unhappy home to seek the relative freedom of the inner city. Whilst the inner city offered greater freedom it also proved challenging for Koko, with her limited wealth and education. Nevertheless, she was already extremely adept with mechanics, electronics and computer systems and has continuously found herself gainful employment, although not always with the most licit of providers. In her first years out of school she found herself associated with "paralegal" activities, including the highly explosive assassination of a senior western suburbs crime figure in Spotswood, with a unexpectedly high death toll, due to the criminal engaging in human trafficking, followed by an international cargo chase in several major cities. Protected by an internal corporate figures, Koko and her associated have been offered new lives on an off-world colony on Mars.

To describe Koko as 'emotionally distant' is somewhat of an understatement. Even her self-chosen nickname is delivered flat and self-deprecating (taken from a chocolate and coffee house). She is not friendly, does not communicate well, hardly ever socialises, is deeply cynical about those with good intentions, and in general doesn't particularly like people. Even in her online communication she is short and to the point. However, she has now acquired a reputation for a range of useful skills, and as a result is highly sought after. Far from amoral however, Koko does have a good side, and will not deliberately engage in acts that harm innocents. Indeed, she has constantly suffered nightmares after the Spotswood affair, and is possibly borderline suicidal as a result, but has not mentioned this to anyone.

She can, and does, work with people but does so at a distance. You will almost never see Koko directly involved in a confrontation, a shadow run, or anything of the sort. Instead, she will be found in a basement kilometers away, working behind the scenes to ensure that the technical and computer hacking side of a mission is carried out efficiently and innovation. If you encounter Koko in a social situation, she is likely to be self-absorbed, not really participating in conversation except as politeness demands.

Using Koko as a NPC is challenging for a GM. She will come with a reputation as being a young hotshot in the computer world, but will also display a number of utility skills in electronics and mechanics. Her quiet and sullen nature may make some PCs decide to simply leave her alone, which brings to question how to play out her borderline psychosis. Unless someone can break down the incredible walls that she has put around her, it is not a matter of if she'll have a breakdown, but when. It shouldn't take much imagination on the part of a GM of how this could be quite an event if it occurs at a critical part of a narrative. Perhaps then the PCs might decide to find out what demons are lurking within her mind.

### **Cyberpunk 20.20**

Role: Techie

INT 9	REF 7	TECH 9	COOL 7	ATTR 6	LUCK 1	MA 5	BODY 4	EMP 2
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*Skills:* Jury Rig 8, Interface 6, Streetdeal 5, Awareness 5, Basic Tech 8, Cybertech 7, Electronics 7, Pilot (Space Vehicle) 2, Programming 6, Space Survival 2, System Knowledge 5, Z-G Maneuvers 4

*Cyberwear:* Image Enhancement (+2 Awareness), Cybermodem Link

Note that Koko in Cyberpunk 20.20 has had multiple careers and therefore multiple roles, providing the character access to Jury Rig (Techie special skill), Interface (Netrunner special skill) and Streetdeal (Fixer special skill). She also has a number of space-skills from training before travelling to Mars.

### **Cyberspace**

Social Class: Lower Class Sprawl

Profession: Tech-Rat

Level: 5

Co -5	Ag +15	SD +5	Me +25	Re +25	St -5	Qu +10	Pr -	In +15	Em -10	Ap -
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*Skills:* No Armor +10, Melee +10, Fire +15, Drive +5, Pilot +20, Environs +10, Electronic Bypass +20, Mechanical Bypass +20, Ambush +2, Stalk/Hide +10, Streetwise +30, Exploit +10, Cyberdeck Operation +40, Cyberdeck Combat +30, Cyberdeck Intrusion +35, Cyberdeck Utilities +30, Mechanical Tech +35, Electronic Tech +35, Software Tech +30, Body Development +25, Perception +40.

*Cyberwear:* Visual Clarity +40, Direct Neural Interface

### **GURPS Cyberpunk**

ST 8	DX 13	IQ 16	HT 9	Spd 5.75
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*Skills:* Computer Hacking 18-, Computer Operation 20-, Computer Programming 16-, Electronics (all) 15-, Electronics Operations 18-, Mechanics (all) 15-, Pilot (space vehicle) 13-, Streetwise 16-, Vacc Suit 13-

*Cyberwear:* Eyes +2, Neural Interface

### **Shadowrun(2nd ed)**

Body 2	Quickness 5	Strength 2	Charisma 2	Intelligence 6	Willpower 5	Essence 4
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*Skills:* Computer 6, Computer Theory 3, Electronics 5, Etiquette (Street) 3, Mechanics 5, Space Pilot 2

*Cyberwear:* Cybereyes with low-light, Datajack

Note the inclusion of a Mechanics skill, painfully missing from Shadowrun.

### **Traveller 2300AD**

Nationality: Australian

Homeworld: Earth/Core

Gravity: Normal

Mass: 64kg (ectomorph)

SIZE 7	DEX 18	END 10	DET 14	INT 16	ELO 8	EDU 8
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Eyesight: Exceptional, Hearing: Excellent., Appearance: Good.

*Career:* Thief,

*Skills:* Bureaucracy-1, Computer-3, Electronic-3, Ground Vehicle-1, Information Gathering-1, Mechanical-2, Space Pilot-1, Streetwise-3

*Bionics:* Exceptional eyes, Neural Jack

With the limited professions in Traveller 2300AD, Koko has wide training, but realistically only one profession - that is "Thief".

# ANGUS ABRANSON INTERVIEW

*With Angus Abranson of Cubicle 7 Entertainment Ltd*

**Q. Let's start with yourself. How did you get into roleplaying and simulation games? What games to you prefer? What have been your most memorable moments in actual play?**

I moved to the States when I was 12 to go to school. It was the first time I'd really been away from my immediate family and I was staying with my Aunt, Uncle and cousins in Washington State. The first day I was there I went out shooting, the second day my cousins introduced me to Dungeons & Dragons. I was instantly hooked. I had previously played the Fighting Fantasy novels that were written by Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson, but had never come across actual Roleplaying Games before then.



I promptly then spent a lot of my time in the States gaming (hot on the heels of being introduced to D&D I was also introduced to Top Secret) and came back to the UK for Christmas with what was probably my most fateful Christmas present ever – a personal copy of both the AD&D Players Handbook and Dungeon Masters Guide. I then soon found a group at my school in England who played, joined in and haven't stopped playing since.

Luckily the groups and friends I played with back in the 90's experimented and played a lot of different games. I remember playing Twilight 2000, Golden Heroes, Paranoia, MERP, Judge Dredd, Runequest during lunch hours and with a Saturday group I'd also joined. This was a trend that stayed with me – alongside some long(ish) running campaigns we've always experimented with new systems, genres, and settings and I've always been really interested to see what the new 'just released' game is all about.

I've got dozens of fond memories and moments from loads of different games – both as a GM and a player, so it would be hard to pick one.

**Q. You've also apparently combined your hobby with your career, first through Leisure Games, and more**

**recently now as the co-founder of Cubicle 7 Entertainment. Can you tell us a little about the formation of Cubicle 7 and a some of the major ups and downs of being responsible for your own company? Do you ever regret not being a well-paid corporate drone, or an international aid worker instead?**

Pretty early on after I started gaming I knew I wanted to be more involved in the industry. Initially I wrote a few things for magazines and started helping out after school at the local games store (Leisure Games). We developed a few game systems and settings when we were still at school (the most memorable was one called Demon Night which was a supernatural cyberpunk game) which we played ourselves but never developed further. I then wrote the background for a game called Dark Winter (more of a cyberpunk skirmish game than an actual RPG) which we published under the name Network X and sold a few thousand copies in the UK through conventions, retailers and chains such as the Virgin Megastore who had reasonably large RPG sections in most of their stores at the time and got more involved with magazines (such as Roleplayer Independent/RPI) until I helped launch Valkyrie magazine at Gen Con in 1994. I spoke alot about starting my own games company, but never actually got round to doing anything about it. I was too busy between work (Leisure Games; which I started helping out part-time in 1986 and went fulltime in 1990), gaming and going clubbing/gigging (music has been as an important component in my life as games). I then helped start The Camarilla (White Wolf's fan club) in the UK around 94/95 and got very heavily involved with that for the next 8 years on various levels from local, regional, national and internationally on the Board of Directors). The itch to do my own games company was still there though and wouldn't go away so, eventually, I stepped down from the Camarilla to pursue starting up Cubicle 7.

I had recently bought a stake in Nightfall Games (who designed SLA Industries), was involved in Dragonmeet (an annual games convention in London) and had been organising a London industry meet-up for several years and knew a lot of people involved in the games industry who had spoken to me about their experiences and expectations working at various levels within the industry.

One of my friends, James Wallis, was winding down his own company (Hogshead Publishing) who had been the publishers of SLA Industries so the game came back to Nightfall. At the time only Dave (Allsop – the designer of SLA) and I were really the only two who were keen on doing something with it so I set up Cubicle 7 Entertainment and licensed the game from Nightfall to publish.

The early years of Cubicle 7 were pretty difficult. We had a very limited amount of money (basically any spare cash I had) which meant that small things could throw spanners in the works and delay work and releases. I think it took almost two years to bring out our first releases (Hunter Sheets Issue One and Cannibal Sector One – both for SLA Industries). During that time I also ended up buying Heresy Gaming (another British based company who had designed Victoriana – a Victorian-era fantasy game) and also acquired the assets of Gameforce (who also owned the Dragonmeet convention).

Dominic (McDowall-Thomas), my current business partner, also started helping out with editorial and then some layout for me and I ended up making him a full partner in the business as it was very apparent I couldn't do everything myself and it was also very good having someone else around to bounce ideas off who got excited and shared my vision of where I wanted Cubicle 7 to go.

Another friend, Chris Birch, pitched the idea of a game based upon an old (and fairly obscure) British series of comics to us called Starblazer which we then got the license to do and created Starblazer Adventure. Around that time we also decided to try and go for a 'big' license, to really test ourselves with a professional looking pitch and after recruiting David Chapman and Fred Hicks we put together a great proposal for Doctor Who from the BBC, which I think it's safe to say we were astounded that we actually managed to get at the time. With Doctor Who (and also Lord of the Rings which I'd already got a verbal agreement on at the time) it gave us a very solid platform to seek financing with the intention of going fulltime.

The two things I'd always complained about was lack of time and lack of money, so by eliminating both of those it

gave us a clean sheet to see if we could actually make what we both felt was a viable business an actual viable, profitable, business.

I'd never be able to be a corporate drone. I'd much prefer to be happy and on a lower wage than unhappy but rich. The RPG Industry seems the ideal choice when you look at it that way :p

**Q. Cubicle 7 seems to have had quite a string of successes in recent years with Ennie nominations for the Best Rules, Best Game and Product of the Year in 2009 with Starblazer Adventures, and a string of nominations in 2010. This suggests a pretty creative crew and a tight ship when it comes to operations. What does Cubicle 7 do that's different?**

Never having worked for another publisher I don't know if we do anything different or not. Everyone involved is a gamer, but has had experience in business before being involved with Cubicle 7, which helps bring a certain amount of professionalism and a healthy eye when looking at what projects we should get involved with.

Dominic (McDowall-Thomas) is not only a great person to run the business with but is brilliant at layout (Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space shows this off especially) and handles a lot of our scheduling and all of our print buying. Sarah (Newton) has been a tremendous help with organising several of our own lines and liaising with authors and Jon (Hodgson), who came on board as our Art Director in the summer of 2010, has really upped our visual style since he started.

We are one of a very few companies that works with partners (be they other companies or individual designers) to help publish their work and get it into distribution. I certainly think that working at Leisure Games for so many years, and getting to know so many other people within the industry, was the best apprenticeship I could have had and has certainly help massively with the direction Cubicle 7 has gone and the goodwill we seem to have amongst others in the industry as well as gamers in general.

We're also blessed to be able to work with some very talented and creative people.

**Q. The company also engages in a lot of licensed products and join efforts; a Call of Cthulhu product from Chaosium, SLA Industries from Nightfall Games, the aforementioned Starblazer Adventures from DC Thomson, Qin with the French company 7eme, Pathfinder and Savage Worlds supplements with Adamant and Triple Ace, Houses of the Blooded with John Wick, Barbarians of Lemuria with Beyond Belief Games, and more. What are the origins of this sort of co-operation? How effective is it? Surely there must be occasional disagreements?**

When I worked at Leisure Games we were very big on "if it's in print we stock it". Thus I got to know a lot of the smaller press companies and Indie designers who didn't have a very wide distribution network (either just doing it themselves or going through IPR). When we went fulltime I wanted to help bring games that I really enjoyed, or designers I really liked, reach a wider audience. Some of them were more than happy to sign-up, others wanted to continue doing what they had been doing at the level they were working at.

For the most part, certainly originally, the partnerships we made were based upon personal relations between myself and the individual designers/companies that was largely built through my dealings with them at Leisure Games. More recently it has expanded as more people approach us about partnerships and I continue to keep an eye out for interesting new games or older games which are out of print but may be interesting to try and resurrect.

In regards to translated titles we publish in English I think the thing that is in our favour is that we are a European company so I get to go to shows in Europe and meet foreign fans, designers, companies, and get exposed to the games

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first hand. There are some fantastic non-English games out there – way more than we could ever hope to translate even if everyone wanted to work with us. I love the creativity of the European markets and really feel that many English speakers are missing so much good stuff because many of us only know the one language.

Generally speaking most of the partnerships we've made have been very good, it's unusual for a game not to return a profit for all involved. I'm sure we'll come unstuck somewhere down the line and have something bite us, but hopefully that day is a long time coming. We've, luckily, not really had any disagreements with anyone as yet but, again, I guess it's probably only a matter of time before we do somewhere.

**Q. Not all roleplaying lines last forever, as we well know. Are we likely to see more publications for SLA Industries or Victoriana?**

Yes, on both counts. Victoriana has been doing very well for us (and won an Ennie for Best Writing in 2010) and we have lots of plans and ideas for the line. We've got a full release schedule for the game this year and have notes on prospective new books that could take us through 2012 and possibly early 2013 without having to think of more ideas. SLA Industries is still being developed and worked on by Nightfall Games but as Dave (Allsop) pays his rent by freelancing for companies such as Wizards of the Coast & Blizzard it is something that has bursts of activity during his downtime and then is silent for a while when a pile of commissions comes his way. We have a new SLA book coming out in the summer and the Nightfall crew are working on the next project as I type.

**Q. Of course, the big coup in the past year has been the publication of Dr Who: Adventures in Time and Space, under license from the BBC.**

**Reviews of the game have been largely positive. Aliens and Creatures has just been released. Can fans of the Who expect to see some extra supplements in the coming year? What about a Torchwood game or expansion?**

Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space is getting a relaunch with the new Eleventh Doctor core set, which features Matt Smith's Doctor and associated imagery, branding and exploits. Once that comes out we have a number of supplements ready to go at a rate of about one every six to eight weeks. These include a mix of current era Doctor Who support material as well as dedicated Box Sets on the older Doctors, looking at each Doctor's story arcs, adversaries, companions, gadgets and adventure hooks. The Doctor should be very busy in the coming year.

There are no plans currently for a Torchwood game as that is a separate license, but we have spoken to the BBC about it and are looking forward to seeing what the new series is going to be like.

**Q. Actually, I should also mention the other big item for the year; The Laundry, based on the series of novels by Charles Stross, based on Chaosium's Basic Role Playing System, and with Jason Durrall as one of the co-authors. It seems to be a combination of H.P. Lovecraft, Delta Green, and the Hellblazer comics. Is that an accurate depiction?**

The novels, and the RPG, are basically a Lovecraftian spy thriller. Charles has released three novels so far (The Atrocity Archive, The Jennifer Morgue and 2010's The Fuller Memorandum, and has a fourth book planned for 2012 I believe. There are also a couple of short Laundry stories on Tor's website. We have a number of supplements planned to support the RPG, which has been one of our biggest launches so far and is continuing to sell very well.

**Q. It is incredibly rare in this industry for products to come out on time (how long did we all wait for HeroQuest?) were some planned publications for 2010 that have not yet been released, most prominent The One Ring, the new Lord of the Rings roleplaying game. How is that progressing? Can you give us some hints about the game system, product etc?**

We're working in conjunction with Sophisticated Games on "The One Ring" RPG. The initial game will be taking place shortly after the events of The Hobbit and will, through subsequent releases, explore the land and cultures of Middle Earth and gradually progress up to the events in The Lord of the Rings Trilogy itself.

The system has been specifically developed with the flavour of the setting being kept as a key ingredient in the design. The way we describe attributes, skills, etc are all taken from words which Tolkien used in the books. We feel it's certainly the most authentic Middle Earth RPG that's been developed and hopefully the atmosphere will shine through peoples game play.

The game is progressing well. As I write, we're about to enter the final playtest phase and the flow of artwork is coming in at a very steady pace. We are currently aiming to have the game out in August, so there should be copies at Gen Con this year.

**Q. In 2011 I believe you're also planning on publishing a cyberpunk game (Genesis Descent) and a translation of Yggdrasill from the 7eme. Can you tell us a little about those?**

Genesis Descent is a new campaign setting for. Talsorian's "Cyberpunk" RPG. I've been a long admirer and player of Cyberpunk but not a lot has really been done with the genre in RPGs for a while. We've seen Interface Zero come out recently (a Savage Worlds Cyberpunk setting that we publish with Gun Metal Games) but many games seem to be taking the Transhuman or Post-Apocalypse angle these days. I feel there is still a lot the cyberpunk genre has to offer, so Genesis Descent is taking a look at the genre from a twenty-first century vantage point – so mobile phones won't be the size of ghetto-blasters and you won't have Rockerboys wandering around. I feel it's a much bleaker setting than the original game.



Yggdrasill was originally published in French by 7eme Cercle, whom we already work with translating and publishing their award winning Qin: The Warring States and are also translating a few of their other games in to English (such as Kuro and Hummanydyne). Yggdrasill takes place in a mythic time of the Vikings, pulling from sources both historical and legend to create a setting where Man, myth and magic all live and battle.

**Q. With the Dr. Who RPG, a Lord of the Rings license, and a string of others Cubicle 7 seems to be hitting the big-time, even with claims of economic recession and the woes of the industry. Between yourselves, Mongoose Games and Games Workshop**

**however the industry at least in Great Britain seems to be surviving and even prospering. Is the company able to keep up with this sort of expansion in its lines?**

The industry in Britain is no different from elsewhere. If anything it can be trickier setting up and operating a business

in the UK than it is in some other countries, as Britain is an expensive place to live. Rents tend to be pretty expensive and that affects both office and living space, which in turn means that wages need to be more than you'd need to survive in many places in America, for example. Plus most of the larger conventions tend to be US-based, for RPGs, so they are quite expensive to attend – and you also have to factor in the travel and recovery times as jetlag can often be pretty annoying on the return leg back to Britain. I think a major plus for being British based though is our proximity to the European market. I attend a number of shows around Europe and that introduces me to a lot of non-English games, companies, designers and artists, that I wouldn't necessarily know about if I wasn't UK based.

Britain certainly has a thriving RPG community with Mongoose, Pelgrane and ourselves being fulltime companies as well as lot of small/indie companies such as Contested Ground Studios (Cold War/Hot City), Steampower Publishing (Dead of Night), Omnihedron Games (Duty & Honour), Cakebread & Walton (Clockwork & Chivalry), Arion Games (Advanced Fighting Fantasy), Guild Companion Publications (Rolemaster, HARP), Lord of the Pies (Umlaut), Corone Design (Hellcats & Hockeysticks) and loads more actively producing new games and support material.

Cubicle 7 has done very well since we moved fulltime back in April 2009, and we're certainly looking to continue the expansion and growth that we've seen in the last couple of years.



#### **Q. Finally... what is a Cubicle 7?**

I'd been playing with company names for years as it was always my dream to run an RPG company. I had lists of names but when it came down to finally deciding what to call the company I couldn't find any of them. Many were along the lines of "Word + Letter" or "Word + Number", I guess that might have stemmed from being part of Network X back in the early 90's.

We also didn't want something that consigned us to a very limited spectrum, or gave us a comedy name (A few friends and myself played around with the idea of starting up "The Drunken English Games Co" once in the mid-90's for example).

I also wanted something that was slightly more generic and could be used across a variety of platforms, so using the word "Games" or "Publishing" was out, thus we opted for Entertainment to wrap the name up.

Cubicle 7 was the name that came to mind and thus Cubicle 7 Entertainment was born. I actually found my original list a couple of years later and, unsurprisingly, Cubicle 7 was never on that list!

**Thank you Angus for joining us at RPG Review!**

Thanks for having me!

# SPACE 1889: THE WORKING MAN'S STRUGGLE

by Simon Stainsby

*'Then his mind wandered back to the Tsar and his million, and he pictured to himself the awful part that a fleet of airships such as his would play in the general European war that people said could not now be put off for many months longer. As he thought of this the vision grew in distinctness, and he saw them hovering over armies and cities and fortresses, and raining irresistible death and destruction down upon them. The prospect appalled him, and he shuddered as he thought that it was now really within the possibility of realisation; and then his ideas began to translate themselves involuntarily into words which he spoke aloud, completely oblivious for the time being of his surroundings.'*

*"No, I think I would rather destroy it, and then take my secret with me out of the world, than put such an awful power of destruction and slaughter into the hands of the Tsar, or, for the matter of that, any other of the rulers of the earth. Their subjects can butcher each other quite efficiently enough as it is. The next war will be the most frightful carnival of destruction that the world has ever seen; but what would it be like if I were to give one of the nations of Europe the power of raining death and desolation on its enemies from the skies! No, no! Such a power, if used at all, should only be used against and not for the despotisms that afflict the earth with the curse of war!"*

*"Then why not use it so, my friend, if you possess it, and would see mankind freed from its tyrants?" said a quiet voice at his elbow.'*

GW Griffith, 1883, *Angel of the Revolution* <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0602281h.html>

James Galloway thumbs a fresh plug of Myrlesford tobacco to his pipe, strikes a red phosphors match, and draws thoughtful puffs as he looks out of the Trades Hall window. Within his lifetime he has seen Gold Fever transform this city from trading outpost to Marvellous Melbourne, a metropolis to rival the great cities of Europe. Gold has also brought power to the working man. Trade Unions, Friendly Societies, Mechanics Institutes and the short lived Eureka Uprising have won freedoms such as Male suffrage and the eight hour day. Across the gulf of space working men slaving as beasts look upon Melbourne with envious eyes, and slowly drew plans of rebellion.

Mars, that jewel in crown of the British Empire and source of the gravity-defying liftwood, has proved a brutal place to live - particularly for working men foolish enough believe Methodist promises of a better life among the stars. These reformers - believing squalid urban environments, idleness and drink were corrupting British spirit - established model villages next to the Martian Canals where hard work and prayer are relentlessly enforced. In these towns workers toil for twelve hours, six days a week, without the hope of a drink at the end of the day. On Sunday, embittered preachers spew brimstone from the pulpit, and no-one has the chance to educate themselves. This temperance union idea of heaven has become a hell worse than transportation for the labourers who work the steel mills Syrtis Major.



Labour they must, for the natives of Mars are barbarians lack the skills to work armaments - quality steel, and the sense to accept the authority of the more evolved civilisation. From the sweat of these workers comes the might of the British Empire. For Mars produces the raw



materials, the liftwood hull, the gomme rubber fittings and the enhanced armour plating that go together to create the 'Duke of York' ether battleship - a mighty flying fortress with enough armaments to reduce a city to rubble and the capacity to take a battalion of elite Scots Guard marines to any inhabited planet in the solar system.

Galloway is aware of their struggle, and understands they are lynch pin in the inter-planetary struggle of the industrial proletariat. Even a small disturbance on Mars will disrupt the flow of liftwood and destabilise the delicate Great Power game of Aeronef brinkmanship. Britain must respond any civil unrest on Mars, if only to prevent America, France or Germany from challenging their dominance of seas, air and space. By supporting their struggle Galloway furthers his own, for troops sent to quell an uprising on Mars are committed to a six month round trip - buying much needed time here on Earth organise workers in Melbourne, and provide assistance to comrades in Chicago, Paris and Berlin.

He marvels of the good fortune provided by the corrupt Parliament of the Colony of Victoria. Premier Gillies, blinded by the opportunities for land speculation and the chance to meet Queen Victoria has placed Galloway in the middle of a fragile communications link between Earth and Mars by approving the launch HMS Philippides, a heliograph station orbiting Melbourne,

When the planets are correctly aligned, (when Mars is opposition to the sun) orbiting heliograph stations provide use reflected sunlight to transmit Morse code messages between Mars and Earth. A message from Prime Minister Gladstone at Whitehall to the Governor Eyre's residence in Syrtis Major sent during business hours, travels from London to Melbourne via submarine telegraph - arriving at night in Melbourne where it is transmitted via huge carbide signalling lamp in the Royal Botanic Gardens to HMS Philippides. (Its sister ship HMS Harbringer orbits above London sending messages during English night). The message then travels from Philippides to HMS Hermes, the Martian heliograph orbiting above Syrtis Major. If the message arrives during the Martian night it is relayed to a ground station near the Meepspoor canal, otherwise the message is transcribed and physically delivered via ship's boat to the Governor's residence. A fleet of ship's boat shuttling between the Governor's residence and Hermes provides constant communication. Gladstone can set Martian policy from Downing Street, and can have a response from Eyre a matter of hours - a true marvel of the modern age. And of course, since the men who operate the signal lamps are all proud to be union - Galloway can listen in.

The colonial bourgeoisie of Mars have contributed. There need for instant communication, to keep up with the latest fashions from London and even follow the cricket have played into his hands. It was the passions inflamed by cricket that led to the commissioning of HMS Philippides in 1882. The Royal Navy only wanted two ships (the Harbringer and the Hermes) for inter-planetary communications, noting that a two day message turnaround was more than sufficient for even military communication needs. At first Anglo-Martians agreed, enjoying the link it provided to home, such as the chance to receive test match scores at the end of each day's play .





However, the nail biting ninth test between England and Australia in 1882 created a outrage in Syrtis Major over the quality of Earth - Mars communications. Daily updates from the first three days play placed England in a commanding position and the Australians were struggling in the second innings. The next message did not make sense. Some how England had lost and all of London was proclaiming the death of cricket. What had happened? The gentlemen of Bradley House, the most fashionable tea house in Syrtis Major, needed to know - not the least because there was a number of large wagers riding on the outcome. Red Captain Gustav Barnaby was incensed by the uncertainty and vowed to donate his winnings (if, indeed, he had won) to improve inter-planetary communications - and within the hour had pledges worth a thousand pounds to the same goal. Within a year the Anglo-Martian elite had raised enough to build the Philippides and receive ball by ball updates of all games played during planetary opposition.

Whilst the wealthy gambled on land or on the outcome of sport, Galloway encouraged working men who had gambled everything on the chance to strike it rich on the gold fields to learn the skills of the industrial age. Young men from Cornwall learnt the art of heliography and got jobs with good conditions in the orbiting stations. Over time Galloway ensured that every heliograph operator comes from speaks Cornish - an obscure dialect unintelligible to outsiders. Little do the rich and foolish know that the bits of gibberish before and after each mirror realignment are hidden messages - and whilst they enjoy hearing how A. J Raffles slow blowing claims 5 for 78 on the third day of play, workers are conspiring interplanetary revolt.

Space 1889, is roleplaying game in the future that never was - a future envisaged by Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Edgar Rice Burroughs - where Venus is a tropical swamp inhabited by dinosaurs, where the remnants of a decadent Martian civilisation cling to network of canals they can no longer maintain - where brave explorers quest for the glory of Empire.

### **Links**

#### *Timelines*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_Melbourne\\_history](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Melbourne_history)  
<http://mateengreenway.com/steampunk/Space1889timeline.htm>

#### *Labour History*

(Around this time the Colony of Victoria lead the world in Labour reforms ....

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian\\_labour\\_movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_labour_movement)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eureka\\_Rebellion\\_\(1857\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eureka_Rebellion_(1857))  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight\\_hour\\_day](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight_hour_day)

#### *Russian Invasion Fears*

<http://localhistory.kingston.vic.gov.au/htm/article/255.htm>

#### Historical Weirdness with potential for SF

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mystery\\_airship](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mystery_airship)

#### Early Australian Aviation

<http://www.ctie.monash.edu.au/hargrave/hargrave.html>

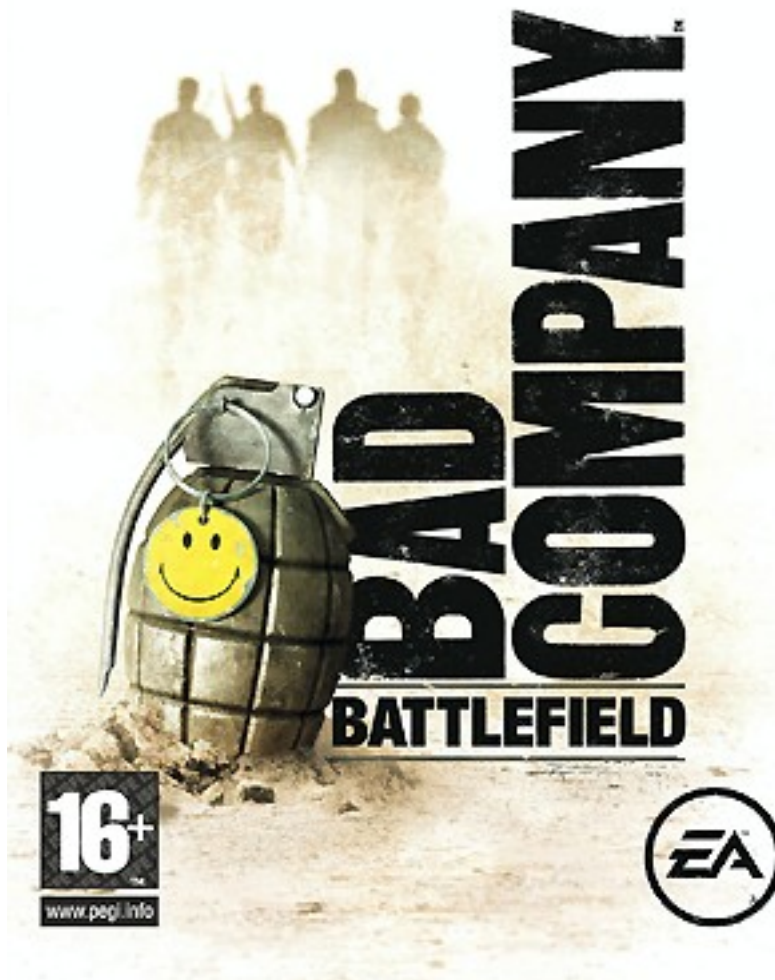
# CONSOLE GAME REVIEW: BAD COMPANY

by MADali

*Battlefield: Bad Company is a first-person shooter developed by EA DICE, for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. A sequel, Battlefield: Bad Company 2 was released for the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 and Microsoft Windows on March 2, 2010.*

Give me a war game and ask me to shoot people in the head and I'm a happy little boy. I don't ask for much, I'm easily pleased.

But "Battlefield: Bad Company" is a bit off the mark for me. I think games nowadays are so much geared towards multiplayer that single player takes a back seat. Way back, like at the cinema where all the seats are full because you bought a ticket at the last minute or because you are looking to make out instead of watch a film.



Well, the single player of "Battlefield: Bad Company" did not want to make out with me. I read a review of it where they mention that most of the environment is destructible, that is, you can bomb the fuck out of trees and houses, which is neat to read at first, until you realize that the whole environment is extremely repetitive.

You are fighting in a green countryside with the same looking small houses, that there is no joy in destroying them. And the game is structured in a very annoying manner. Whenever you get killed you return back to your last autosave checkpoint. Except the enemies that you have killed before your death don't respawn. So, you can pass any part of the game, no matter how hard, just by going back to the place. Even if you kill one soldier, it makes it easier on the next round. Where does the irritating part come in? It's that the checkpoints are in the lousiest sections of the game. You run to the next war zone, kill a soldier or two, and get killed (which I did get killed a lot because I played at the hard difficulty, I like my games like

I like my penis) and then you return to the checkpoint and start running again for 2 minutes. Get killed, run again to the same spot for two minutes. In other games, the checkpoints are at fantastic locations, places right before the action. So killed, you are shooting instantly. Killed, shooting. Not like this game, which is, killed, run, killed, run, *argh*.

The Company in question is called Bad Company because of their actions in the military, such as joyriding in a helicopter and damaging it, injecting a virus into a network, or other acts of damages. These kinds of destructive actions certainly do not please a military army that is aimed at destroying other countries. To punish these kind of mavericks, the US army puts them in the Bad Company, a squad with an above average mortality rate. Basically, these guys are extremely expendable.

You play the role of Private Marlowe, new to the company, and working with three other squad members, that fight beside you in the game, and of course, never actually die, which means its not really that immersive. And maybe it's just the Hard Difficulty I was playing, but not only do they not die, they are completely incompetent. So, you just have three other soldiers shooting at the enemy, almost never getting any of them, and the enemy soldiers mainly shooting at you, usually ignoring your squad members.

But getting back to the characters and the story, the US Army is fighting some kind of unnamed war with made-up companies, but its full of Russians and Arabs, and I'm already feeling a bit uncomfortable. I don't know, maybe its age, or maybe it's because I'm in the Middle East and I live in the one of the members of the Axis of Evil, but the US army blazingly shooting at enemies for no real purpose does not make me happy. I like shooting Nazis in the head, but anything after that, and I can feel like I'm in some kind of weird surreal fantasy-reality loop, where I swear I can see my character shooting myself in the face, and applauding my own death. And to make it EVEN worse, the Bad Company guys stop following the government rules, go AWOL, chasing some kind of gold. It's completely devoid of any morality, and I usually don't even mind a game where your character is slicing up babies for fun, but at least in that situation, you know it's WRONG, but here, it's done with irrelevance and lightness, that, I don't know, I'm rambling, but guys, war isn't cool.



Final notes. Let's discuss Multiplayer, which is the highlight of First Person Shooters nowadays. The multiplayer was...I didn't play it. I've stopped playing Multiplayer long time ago. I play video games for the single player of it. Playing games is my ME time. It would like watching a movie at home, but the stereo system plugged in some kind of server, where you are watching the movie simultaneously with fifty other people who talked throughout it. If I wanted to play "Bad Company" with strangers I did not know, get shot at by trigger happy American kids while cursing me, I'd join the fucking army. 2/5

# MOVIE REVIEW: ENTER THE VOID

*by Andrew Moshos*

**dir:** Gaspar Noè

What a crazy, fucked-up film.

Preparing yourself for a Gaspar Noè film is not something that is genuinely possible. Having seen others of his flicks, none of which I will ever see again, I was determined to not see this flick ever as well. Since I'm reviewing it, well, that means something changed in my thinking, and I'm glad, to an extent, that it happened. Not too proud to admit when I'm wrong.

A friend of a friend who works in the film industry told me she saw the flick at a festival, and that it was quite an amazing experience. Though I knew nothing about her before that day, her thoughts, conveyed to me over a long and boozy conversation on a Saturday afternoon at a local pub, regarding flicks in general (that she'd worked on in New Zealand, being those flicks involving children wandering into a Witch-filled wardrobe and a Jesus-substitute lion called Aslan) and this flick itself intrigued me. They intrigued me to the point where my absolute determination to never again be violated by a Gaspar Noè flick wavered, and over time led to a confident 'maybe?'

And in the end I caved. I'm not entirely happy with the experience, because, as I should have expected, there are certain sights and sounds in this amazing flick that I wish I'd never seen and experienced, and which alcohol will now have to delete for me (in its usual sporadic and haphazard manner). But overall I think, I hope, the experience was a compelling and affecting one, and thus worthwhile.

Make no mistake: it is a stunning, tedious, amazing, excruciating film. The sounds and visuals are calculated and amped up deliberately to arouse and bludgeon the senses of the viewer. Even the opening credits transport the viewer to a bad place even after only four or so minutes of strobing neon staccato and mania.

And then the drug-addled flick begins. We see everything, almost everything, from the perspective of Oscar (Nathaniel Brown), and what isn't from his perspective directly, is with the camera filming him from behind (in third person perspective, so to speak), so that he is always either viewing things directly or seeing himself. He is a drug-using drug dealer in Tokyo, who spends the first half hour of this long-arsed flick out of his mind on drugs. We see his very trippy hallucinations, and the droning thoughts in his empty head. He lives with his sister Linda (Paz de la Huerta), who cares so very much about him.

And then, in the carrying out of his drug dealer-y duties, he dies. The rest of the film mostly is either reminiscences of his life, replaying certain important or meaningful scenes, or Oscar's disembodied consciousness observing all the





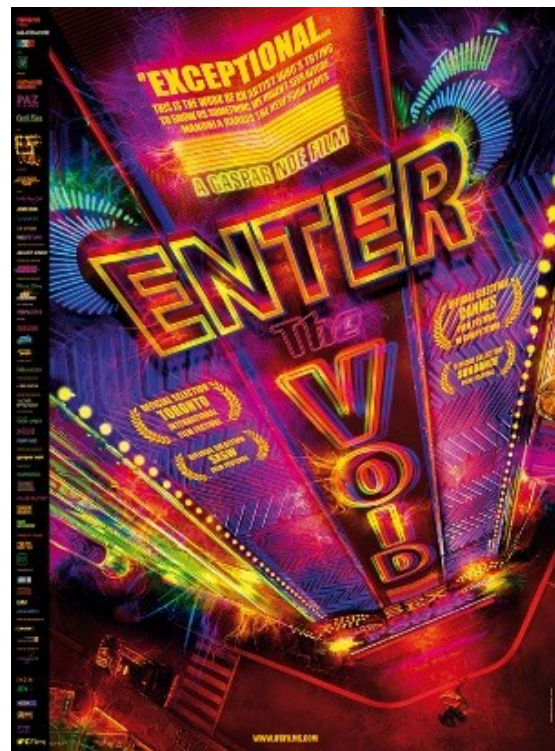
people that he knew in Tokyo when he was still alive.

How does this happen, or what does it mean? Well, nothing, man, it doesn't mean nothing. It's called Enter the Void, after all. And what's a Void other than oblivion and nothingness? In the first few minutes, Oscar talks about the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Other characters talk about the Tibetan Book of the Dead. And then a different character asks Oscar whether he's finished reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead. I wonder if the Tibetan Book of the Dead has anything to do with the story.

This other character, who has the profound misfortune of looking like a scuzzier and even more unkempt version of me, only much thinner and dirtier, then summarises not only what the Tibetan Book of the Dead says, but what Oscar's soul / disembodied consciousness is going to experience (and us by default) over the next two and a bit hours. This other mentor / fellow traveller, Alex (Cyril Roy) specifically says that when we die, our soul travels around visiting the people we know, passing through lights to other stages of consciousness, re-experiencing key moments in one's life, before either passing through to nirvana, or, by becoming confused and lost, ending up reincarnated in a new body.

And that's exactly what happens. I don't think you can spoil something as out there as this flick, which is an auditory and visual mindfuck from beginning to end, so there's no real utility to spoiler warnings in this or any other instance. There's no plot, there's no real underlying meaning other than the obvious metaphysical implications of Oscar's experience. The film doesn't even need to tell us that this is what the makers think happens when we die: all they're saying is representing something like this would be 'cool'.

So it's an experiment above all else. The thing with experiments is that sometimes they succeed even when they fail, since the results can go off into new directions that have nothing to do with the initial objectives or hypotheses. Gaspar Noë is on record as saying that 2001: A Space Odyssey is his favourite flick of all time, and that he was tremendously affected and influenced by that so-called 'star gate' sequence in the last part of the flick. It's a fairly well-known, well parodied sequence where the main character, after silencing the "Daisy, Daisy" singing computer, goes through some kind of portal and endures a highly trippy effects laden experience which mostly seems to consist of his irises changing colour, and shiny archaic graphics whizzing past on either side, for eons until we see a foetus floating in space.



Noë's taken that, and stretched it out further, further than anyone previously dared or possibly thought was wise, and added to it even more metaphysical elements, rendering it even 'bigger', so to speak, than Kubrick would have bothered with.

Does it work? Well, it's hard for me to say. It is such an endurance test, such a gruelling experience, with plenty of scenes that just smack of wanting to aggrieve and brutalise the audience; to force the audience to feel something, whether it's offence, revulsion or arousal. But I can't ignore the technical qualities of making something so, so, so fascinating, and with no concession at all to (positive) audience sensibilities or marketability.

The vision of Tokyo is like nothing else I've ever seen in any film, Japanese or otherwise, but it's not pretending to be a real vision of Tokyo. It's a day-glo hyperreal nightmare cityscape where everything is rendered in neon pitched so



extremely at the ends of the colour spectrum that you know that human eyes can't see reality in this way or risk burning out permanently.

The transitions between reality states, or levels of consciousness, were terrifying, to me, and each one set my teeth on edge but also kept me on the edge of awe. Noè and his crew have long experimented with using sound and visual effects to impact on the viewer's experience almost independently of the sometimes horrific imagery they like to serve up, and this is the first time where he's gotten it right, I think.

Just when, hours into the film, which feels like it goes on forever, and probably could have, I thought I didn't care about the characters, the story transitions into a re-living of Oscar's life, where the key moments of his and Linda's experiences are shown giving them some depth and giving their relationship some pathos. Orphaned at a young age, we come to understand why they are so important to each other.

Of course, this being a goddamn Gaspar Noè flick, he's compelled to go further, and make their relationship borderline incestuous, and to include so many instances of Freudian imagery and implications, and scenes of Oscar spying on his parents getting it on, and transitioning in scenes where he's having sex with someone, or observing Linda having sex with her awful Japanese boyfriend Bruno, and temporarily embodying Bruno so he can see what it's like, into seeing himself banging his own mother. Yes, just when you think you've got a handle on it, and can enjoy/endure anything that a cinema can throw at you, a fucker like this forces you to watch someone banging their own mother or watching their sister have an abortion.

The abortion isn't even the worst of it. There are horrifying scenes of blood covered children screaming as the mashed corpses of their parents drip in the front seats of a crashed car. There are sex scenes in the flick which are anything but erotic, and I'm pretty sure there's a scene where a young stupid guy is blowing a sarariman, while another guy looks on and unbuckles. There's even a CGI scene of sex from the inside, let's say, of a woman's vagina/cervix, and the natural result of the sex act. And there's dozens of other instances calculated not just to horrify or be seen as cheesy, but which are definitely meant to affect the viewer's feelings regarding reality, metaphysics, and that whole messy life and death stuff.

This is not a flick I can recommend to anyone. It's too long and too extreme in everything that it does, and it's so goddamn trippy that you'd think it was made exclusively for stoners and the kinds of people that go to 'cult' late night sessions at their local arthouse where they can still watch Rocky Horror or The Room or Human Centipede or other crap that's meant to be crap and ironic, or at least taken as such by despicable hipster audiences.

*Enter the Void* is far too well made, and far too extreme and expansive to fall into that or any other category. There's nothing camp or 'fun' about any of it. Too much work has been put in to making this the most singular flick that it can be, with no obvious pigeonhole or genre that it can be lumped into, embracing and discarding thousands of ideas in the nebulous service of no plot, but of an amazing experience, all the same.

There are inspirations and such arising from other flicks (like the obvious 2001 and Hitchcock's *Lady in the Lake*), but it's pretty certain that you've never watched anything like this and probably won't want to for a long time afterwards.

Is it a good film? I have no idea, but it was an amazing experience, one that went on past the point of human endurance, beyond the point of being bearable, and back around again; one that left me feeling bamboozled and exhausted, and relieved. It's certainly an evil, brilliant, terrible flick, and I hope I don't see its like for at least a few years.

8 times drug use and Tibetan Buddhism have never looked this warped out of 10

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"Do you remember that pact we made? We promised to never leave each other." – *Enter the Void*

*Originally published at: <http://movie-reviews.com.au/content/enter-void>*

# MOVIE REVIEW: MONSTERS

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Gareth Edwards

Monsters. They're everywhere. Not just under your bed, or bursting out of your closet when you're not looking, or threatening you on public transport with their odours and with requests for money.

They're also, apparently, in Mexico, trying to get across the border to the States in order to make some money and eat some quality junk food. These monsters are so terrible that a huge wall has to be built in order to keep them out, away from decent, law-abiding white people.

And then there's this strange flick some guy made about some actual monsters, as in, giant alien octopi, that have infected Central America with their casual destruction and socialist economic programs.

Clearly, military strongman and certifiable egomaniac Hugo Chavez is the real target here. Whether he is or not, there's monsters out there, and the going is getting tough.

This flick was apparently made for around \$500,000, which isn't a lot of money in the film world. In my world it's what I would earn in ten years of wageslavery, so to me it STILL represents a fuckload of money; thank you Filmworld for skewing our perception of what a lot of money is or isn't. I doubt it actually was that little, because every time these stories arise regarding flicks made on the smell of an oily rag, the press tends to leave out all the money spent on the flick in post-production, and on marketing and such. Whatever the reality, the fact is that this is a reasonably competent sci-fi/action flick in the vein of District 9 and Cloverfield, that nonetheless shares the same weaknesses but manages to overcome some of the common shortfalls of this new genre/production process.

Shooting entirely on that digital video that's supposed to imply 'you are there', and really just implies 'you are cheap', it also means the special effects can be much more cost effective. The main effects were apparently done by one person on their home computer, being the director Gareth Edwards. Again, these stories tend to mask the reality of the situation, but they do make for an entertaining narrative.

This flick, though, isn't really about the effects, or even the aliens themselves, if aliens they are. Since there's no budget, the film spends the vast majority of its time focussing on the relationship of the two main characters. One is a



photojournalist called Kaulder (played by the unlikely-named Scoot McNairy), and the other is Sam (Whitney Able), who is the daughter of Kaulder's ultimate boss at the paper he works for. In the film's world, a probe crashed on Earth in Mexico, and a while later, these giant monstrous creatures started appearing. Sam was in Mexico, Kaulder is tasked with getting her home through the Infected Zone, and that's the entirety of the premise.

In any other flick, be it action or sci fi or otherwise, there's going to be an awkward and obligatory love story or love interest. Quite often, these days, the romantic aspect tends to be a guy proving himself to his ex-wife and kids in the face of catastrophic weather, the world ending, or ruthless aliens, so that the 'bitch' can realise she made the wrong choice by leaving the main character in the first place. All it took was the destruction of the planet for her to see the man's true qualities.

This flick doesn't work like that at all. It doesn't even posit it as a will-they-or-won't-they scenario, it just has it as two people who don't know each other that well, trying to survive the potential onslaught of these monstrous creatures, whilst trying to jump the border back into the States.

Yes, they're Americans trying to sneak into America. Who isn't going to get horny reading that premise?

The truth is, this isn't an action flick in the sense that anyone, especially our protagonists, are fighting against the aliens. They're just trying to get past them. And the people who are fighting them don't seem to be doing that well. The aliens are monsters in the sense that they don't seem to be part of some intelligent plan or species; they're just doing what they're doing, like crazy kids, raising hell.

So in truth it's more of a road movie, with Kaulder and Sam getting to know each other on their travels. They're not trying to save the world, they're not trying to defeat our new alien overlords, they're just trying to survive.

Finding that satisfying will depend on expectations, I think. People who go in to this flick expecting a kick-arse action extravaganza are going to be sorely disappointed. People who expect or demand more characterisation and believable characters and acting in their flicks might possibly think this is the greatest thing since bread was ever sliced.

I'm kind of in the middle myself. There are bits of Kaulder and Sam's interactions that I found interesting or engaging. I also found it funny that one of the additional complications forcing our intrepid duo to hit the road and traverse a far more perilous path home results because Kaulder acts like a drunken idiot who, after Sam turns down his half-hearted come-ons, sleeps with some local girl who rips him off for all they're worth, down to the passport and ticket that was meant to get Sam home safely.

Mexicans, eh? Always taking the jobs (like sleeping with Kaulder) that Americans won't do anymore.

It's impossible to have a flick like this with this kind of setting without seeing the clear parallels with the whole immigration issue, illegal and otherwise, that the States has been embroiled in since, oh, let's say the Spanish – American War. The perilous journey that Kaulder and Sam undertake is no less harrowing than the one thousands of poor peasants undertake each day so that they can get poptarts, cable tv and iPhones on demand.

It's not really a didactic exercise, not at all. The aliens do what they do, Sam and Kaulder scurry along, eventually both realising that the drama surrounding them is only the spice they need to realise they don't want to go home anyway, so they can fall in love before the aliens' tentacles get them.

It kind of works. I kind of liked it. I liked that Kaulder is something of a jerk, but not one lacking entirely in self-awareness. Sam's sole quality seems to be that she looks a bit lost, and that the engagement ring on her finger seems way too heavy for her feeble arm to carry. I couldn't get over the fact that the guy called Kaulder was called Scoot in reality. What kind of a name is that?

The bit that really resonated with me was a sequence where Sam essentially accuses the photojournalist of being opportunistic at best and a callous mercenary at worst. He outlines for her the curious market pressures that define the economics surrounding his job: a picture of a kid killed by the aliens means he gets paid \$10,000 per shot, however the picture of a happy living kid surviving in the infected zone nets him nothing.

It reminded me of the notorious kerfuffle that arose regarding a photo taken by a chap called Kevin Carter; a photograph of a Sudanese child being stalked by a vulture. Carter came to epitomise for many people the predatory capacity in journalism, and it's hard to not see the parallels here. Kaulder must make, for us, the transition between being seen to exploit the hardship around him, to doing his bit for these poor, monster-oppressed people.

Of course, he's only doing it to get into Sam's pants, but so are all the noble things men have done from the dawn of time onwards.

And, hey, it looks like it worked, since Scoot and Whitney, the two actors, are now married. If ever you needed proof that you only needed to pretend to do the right thing in order to trick 'em into sleeping with you... well, there it is.

It's a different take on a familiar genre, and one that I'm not sure audiences are going to embrace. People expecting War of the Worlds are going to tear their hair out in frustration. People expecting something deep and meaningful are similarly going to be pissed off.

But others who are just expecting an interesting flick might be rewarded. The best thing this flick achieves is that the camerawork doesn't get frenetic or too frantic at all, the low-key electronica score is beautiful and effectively subtle, the two leads don't look like the leads these kinds of flicks usually have, and the Mexican setting and storyline is an interesting twist on the genre and a vision of contemporary fears. Also, in keeping with the aforementioned flicks, it succeeds with a fairly downbeat ending, mirroring the premise that, whatever these monstrous creatures are, the Earth itself is changing to accommodate them, and this doesn't look like a battle the humans are winning.

I also think it was a far more enjoyable flick than District 9, though it's far less ambitious, but I can imagine a lot of people disagreeing with me. It just wasn't as annoying. And what was odd about it ultimately, to me, proved to be something ever so slightly worthwhile.

7 sometimes you wonder who the REAL monsters are: Wait, oh yeah, it's the giant squiddie things out of 10

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'He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.' – Friedrich "Cuddles" Nietzsche

*Originally published at: <http://movie-reviews.com.au/content/monsters>*

# IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF RPG REVIEW

## **Alternate Worlds**

***Interview with Johnathan Tweet ...  
Designing Realistic Campaign Worlds and  
Coherent Stories ... Talislanta ... Jorune ...  
Artesia ... Earthdawn ... Eclipse Phase ...  
The TORG Files: Roleplaying The  
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